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RANGELAND LOVE STORIES

DEC. 1952

BEWARE A RIVER RAIDER'S KISSES!

by MARIAN O'HEARN

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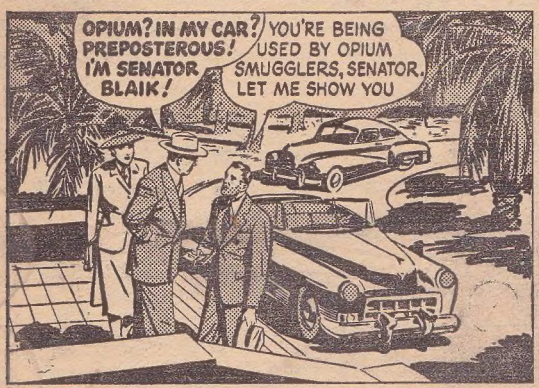

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NEXT ISSUE—PUBLISHED NOVEMBER 26TH

25¢

RANGELAND LOVE STORIES

Combined with ROMANCE WESTERN

Vol. 10 December, 1952 No. 2

Thrilling Old-West Novelettes

BEWARE A RIVER RAIDER'S KISSES! ..... *Marian O'Hearn* 12
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Here's lots of new pen pals for you to meet.

Any resemblance between any character appearing in fictional matter, and any person living or dead, is entirely coincidental and unintentional

Published bi-monthly by New Publications, Inc., an affiliate of Popular Publications, Inc., at 1125 East Valle Ave., Kokomo, Indiana. Editorial and Executive Offices, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. Henry Steeger, President. John J. McVarish, Treasurer. Entered as second-class matter at the Post Office at Kokomo, Indiana. Copyright, 1952, by New Publications, Inc. This issue is published simultaneously in the Dominion of Canada. Copyright under International Copyright Convention and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. All rights reserved, including the right of reproduction, in whole or in part, in any form. Single copy, 25c. Annual subscription for U.S.A., its possessions and Canada, $1.50; other countries 50c additional. All correspondence relating to this publication should be addressed to 1125 E. Valle Ave., Kokomo, Indiana, or 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. When submitting manuscripts, enclose stamped, self-addressed envelope for their return, if found unavailable. The publishers will exercise care in the handling of unsolicited manuscripts, but assume no responsibility for their return. Printed in the U.S.A.

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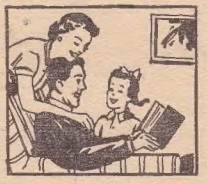

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Record Wrangling

By Arizona Blake

HOWDY, Tophands. A cool breeze is blowing up and mighty soon we'll have to stir and throw another log on the campfire. But meanwhile, all you rannyhans, come join in the prairie gossip in between spinning out our remuda of tunes.

We've got a pretty special catch in our cavvy this month. It's something you hombres from every crossroads in the country have been asking for—a roundup of current rhythm and barrelhouse blues numbers for all you groovy buckaroos. And here it is, our jazz-land jamboree!

As you know, there's nothing in American life that has spawned more legends than American jazz, and one of the greatest legends has been woven about the romantic, immortal young man with a horn, Bix Beiderbecke. Born in Davenport, Iowa, in 1903, he lived just 28 short crowded years, but it was a lifetime of free-wheeling, robust pioneering in the magic world of jazz. Bix, the virtuoso with the warm, restrained, mellow cornet tone, hobnobbed with such other greats as Hoagy Carmichael, Mezz Mezzrow, Paul Whiteman, Pee Wee Russell, the perennial Bing Crosby and even the beloved Babe Ruth.

During Bix's brief lifetime both jazz and phonograph recordings sprung into popularity. He was a boy when fabulous New Orleans musicians like Louis Armstrong began traveling north. He grew up along with the different jazz styles, like Dixieland, New Orleans, Chicago and Kansas City. And in the late Twenties, when the tempo changed from the two-beat, jig-time to the more sophisticated four-beat and the suave guitar fenced out the raucous banjo, Bix was playing his greatest music, solos like *Singing the Blues, I'm Comin' Virginia* and the piano solo, *In a Mist.*

Folks still talk with awe of Bix's inspired improvisations, of his topnotch musical ideas. Now you can hear his wonderful waxings on a new, three-volume (six sides) *album* Columbia has issued, called simply THE BIX BEIDERBECKE STORY. The three volumes are arranged in chronological order and contain most of this genius' best work. They're a splendid addition to any collection of disks.

EASY DOES IT

by Benny Goodman (*Album* by Capitol)

The King of Swing shows some changes in his style as he cuts the wax with his trio, quintet, sextet and septet in an LP *album* for Capitol. His playing is more relaxed, more enjoyable to listen to. While

(Continued on page 8)

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(Continued from page 6)

you bend an ear to *Henderson Stomp* or *Sweet Georgia Brown* or the other tunes, notice how even though he rides herd on his outfit with tight, intricate arrangements, he still allows the individual players to cut out of the bunch and kick it up every now and then when they get the urge.

WOODY HERMAN (And The Herd) AT CARNEGIE HALL 1946

Volume 1 and Volume 2 (*albums* by MGM)

What were you doing on the night of March 25th, 1946? It's more likely that you were out spooning with a country charmer than sitting in New York's famous Carnegie Hall, listening to Woody Herman and his orchestra spellbinding the audience with their jazz. These platters are on-the-spot recordings, with bass player Chubby Jackson, vibes-virtuoso Red Norvo (he's also in Benny Goodman's outfit above) young Sonny Berman, Bill Harris carrying the trombone passages, "Flip" Phillips soloing as tenor, and Woody himself on some clarinet solos and a blues vocal. The tunes upon which they improvise include such standards as Gershwin's *The Man I Love, Four Men on a Horse* and *Your Father's Mustache.*

I JUST TELEPHONE UPSTAIRS MY MOTHER

by Hank Snow (RCA)

The Rainbow Ranch Boys hum in the background while Hank Snow puts homespun sincerity into his voice as he warbles: "When I'm troubled and it gets a little weary below, I JUST TELEPHONE UPSTAIRS." This lyric is different from Hank's usual style, but he certainly knows how to put it over. It's one you'll be hearing for a long time.

The backing is one Hank wrote himself, MY MOTHER. The Jordanaires join in to valentine the old mother who is always faithful to her son, even when he acts like a gosh-durn coyote to her.

SNOWSHOE THOMPSON FATBACK LOUISIANA, U.S.A.

Tennessee Ernie (Capitol)

Using Eskimo lingo, Tennessee Ernie aims to repeat the success of his famous MULE TRAIN. "Go, man, go, gotta get on through the snow," this waddy urges. Even though there's lots of slush on the road, Ernie prances through the lyrics.

Plattermate was composed by funnyman Stan Freberg. Here Tennessee chants his reasons—including a sagehen called Lula Belle—for "fixin' to stay in FATBACK LOUISIANA, U.S.A." You can corral Ernie's show on Cliffie Stone's "Hometown Jamboree," station KLAC-TV.

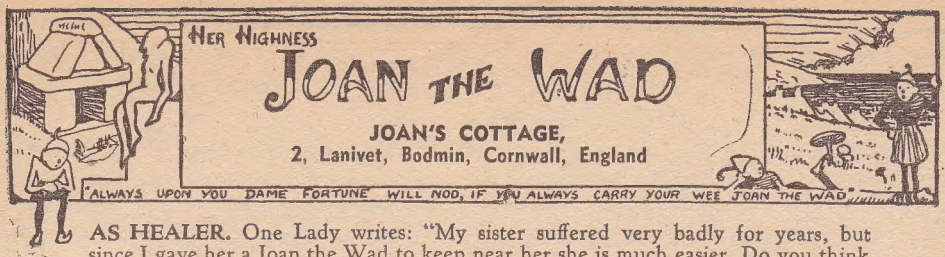
WINNING SPINNERS

Here's a remuda of some of the newest *albums* you rannyhans will want to twirl.

If you've seen Gene Kelly's recent hilarious movie musical, "SINGIN' IN THE RAIN," you'll not want to miss the MGM sound-track recording, as a pleasant reminder of Gene and Debbie Reynolds and Donald O'Connor strutting their stuff. Here are all the lively tunes, including the splashy title song. Only Donald O'Connor's hit number, *Make 'Em Laugh,* loses something on a record since his terrific dancing can't be seen.

Howling into a microphone, his face a study in anguish while he tears his hair—that's the picture on the cover of a new Columbia LP *album,* and all one needs to know that it's the first *album* collection of JOHNNIE RAY! He stampeded up the trail of record-breaking success with his very first release CRY and then THE LITTLE WHITE CLOUD THAT CRIED. He's the only prominent singer who wears a hearing aid (he's partially deaf due to a childhood accident). He's

(Continued on page 10)


HER HIGHNESS
JOAN THE WAD
JOAN'S COTTAGE,
2, Lanivet, Bodmin, Cornwall, England
ALWAYS UPON YOU DAME FORTUNE WILL NOD, IF YOU ALWAYS CARRY YOUR WEE JOAN THE WAD

AS HEALER. One Lady writes: "My sister suffered very badly for years, but since I gave her a Joan the Wad to keep near her she is much easier. Do you think this is due to Joan or the water from the Lucky Well?"

AS LUCK BRINGER. Another writes: "Since the war my wife and I have been dogged by persistent ill-luck and we seemed to be sinking lower and lower. One day someone sent us a Joan the Wad. We have never found out who it was, but, coincidence if you like, within a week I got a much better job and my wife had some money left her. Since then we have never looked back and, needless to say, swear by 'Queen Joan'."

DO YOU BELIEVE IN LUCK ?

AS MATCHMAKER. A young girl wrote and informed me that she had had scores of boy friends, but it was not until she had visited Cornwall and taken Joan back with her that she met the boy of her dreams, and as they got better acquainted she discovered he also has "Joan the Wad."

AS PRIZEWINNER. A young man wrote us only last week: "For two years I entered competitions without luck, but since getting Joan the Wad I have frequently been successful although I have not won a big prize. But I know that . . . who won $5,600 in a competition has one because I gave it to him. When he won his $5,600 he gave me $280 for myself, so you see I have cause to bless 'Queen Joan'."

HURRY

Mrs. WILSON, of Falmouth, says, 1951:
Since receiving Joan the Wad . . . my husband's health has improved 100%.

Mr. Jones of Cheltenham, says, 1951:
Send me - J. O'Lantern. Since receiving Joan the Wad have won two 1st prizes in Crosswords . . . *John Bull* and *Sunday Chronicle*.

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AS SPECULATOR. A man writes: "I had some shares that for several years I couldn't give away. They were 14 cent shares and all of a sudden they went up in the market to $1.10. I happened to be staring at Joan the Wad. Pure imagination, you may say, but I thought I saw her wink approvingly. I sold out, reinvested the money at greater profit and have prospered ever since."

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and I will send you both History and Mascot.

(Continued from page 8)

been called "Cry-Guy," "The Heat Ray," "Mr. Emotion," "Mr. Commotion," and "The Atomic Ray."

This singing sensation with the supercharged vocal style who sobs and shouts his way through a song is the same jigger who could say, after his opening night in one of New York's biggest nightclubs: "I guess I was a hit—people I don't even know applauded me." They'll applaud this *album* too, with four sides backed by the Buddy Cole Quartet, four by the Four Lads, in a variety of blues, ballads and uptempo interpretations.

BIG BAND BASH! is the moniker of Billy May's new Capitol *album*. In tunes such as *Perfidia* and *You're Driving Me Crazy* you'll notice that he's got a brand-new approach which makes for keen dancing and heady listening.

Want a touch of the exotic, the sultry, the lush? Here's LATIN AMERICAN RHYTHMS, with Miguelito Valdes waving the tropical wand over works as familiar as *Babalu* and some you've never heard of. Incidentally, if you like BABALU, get Yma Sumac's new Capitol recording. It's backed by WIMOWEH, and both sides feature her phenomenal voices.

THE TROJANS AT CARTHAGE is MGM's new LP of the work of Berlioz, a composer who died a "failure." Not too long after he hit boothill, however, folks got around to listening to his music again, and then they realized that the tremendous opera from which this recording is taken has stunning power and beauty. The most popular selections from the opera are here, including the *Royal Hunt and Storm* and the *Trojan March*.

If you like the show tunes of Rodgers and Hart, you pards will want to cut a groove in the new complete shellacking of BABES IN ARMS, a Columbia LP. Some of the lyrics make that old needle sizzle in the wax; some of them waft you into the sweet and mellow. Mary Martin, a petticoat who will never sell you short, stars in this latest show-revival-on-discs.

RODEO of POPS

It's sometimes hard to say what'll make one song a dud and another a bucolic lyric a nation-wide hit, but the ones we list below have one strong trend: Mixed in with the tenderfeet tunes and the instrumental work-outs are many revivals of the tried-and-true popular favorites. Like old friends, we can't bear to see them fade away—but keep reviving them.

Connie Haines heads the revival list by vocalizing evergreen YOU MADE ME LOVE YOU (I didn't want to do it) and with Alan Dale, dueting on the flipover, THE DARKTOWN STRUTTERS' BALL. (Coral).

Cowboy Copas goes riding for a fall in King's recording of BOOMERANG. "I sealed my heart in a letter and mailed it to you—but it came back COD," he wails to a faithless filly. The biscuit-mate is, natch, IT'S ENOUGH TO MAKE ANYONE CRY. Cowboy never had any formal musical education, but learned much from his family, who were good amateur musicians.

Old-timer Ben Light brings a lively piano, rhythm section and organ accompaniment to old-time tunes, MEXICALI ROSE and ROSALIE.

That's the haystack of recordings for today, tophands. We've got a note from Jane Warren of Route 2, Titusville, Pa., who wants you jiggers to help her form a fan club for Marty Licklider. Betty Wilson, of Baltimore, Md., we'll be writing you about your record problem pronto. And we're sorry we can't be of more help, Alberta Peters of Fayetteville, Ark., but thanks for writing us anyway.

Let's hear from you other rannies, too. The address is *Record Wrangling*, c/o RANGELAND LOVE STORIES, Popular Publications, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. Adios for now, pardners.

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BEWARE A RIVER

By Marian O'Hearn

Albora's wayward ranny knew just how to get what he wanted—

whether it was robbing a river steamer . . . or melting her heart!

She forgot that he was an outlaw, a member of the ruthless pirate gang. . . .

RAIDER'S KISSES!

THIN light edged over Narrow Point onto the river trail, and the pre-dawn darkness dissolved into gray. A clear, fresh gray that spiced the air and made even the rising mists seem dramatic.

Albora reined her pony to a walk and finally pulled in near the point, a thin ledge of land that thrust out toward a rocky shelf projecting from the opposite bank. The dawn loveliness would last only a few minutes, and as soon as the mist left the river, the ugliness of the Missouri would appear.

As she waited for the sun's flamboyant arrival, Albora's face was almost still. It was a fine-boned, sensitive face, seeming a little withdrawn, and stamped by a faint

exotic apartness. The alien quality was most evident in the shape of her cornelian red mouth for, while the upper lip was firmly decisive, the under lip was full and impulsive. Symbols of promise and denial. Her eyes, heavy-lidded and long, were molten amber, but her pale, sandal-wood hair and tanned apricot skin made them seem very dark.

A tall girl with a light, slim bony structure and smoothly feminine, definitely moulded flesh, she was dressed as casually as a cowboy or river roustabout in a thin, faded shirt, bright yellow neckerchief, denim jeans and well-used boots.

The sun rose into the sky and the river mists dissolved, revealing not only the churning, muddy water, but a steamboat tied up to the opposite bank. Because of sand bars and submerged trees, steamboats were unable to navigate the Missouri by night and always put in wherever darkness found them.

This boat, moored at one of the narrowest parts of the river, showed her name in proud, golden letters: *Lady Jane*. In a few minutes she would cast off and move upstream and, within half an hour, make another stop at the wood station. And Albora had to be at the station when the Lady Jane put in for fuel.

As she lifted the reins to turn her pony, a gun cracked from the opposite bank. From somewhere near the Lady Jane! It barked again and again. Three swift, signal shots. And instantly, a dozen weapons spat an answer.

The girl wheeled back toward the river. On the opposite bank, horsemen were emerging from concealing brush. They charged across the mud of the river's edge, right up to the *Lady Jane*. As they reached her, some hurtled from their ponies to swarm up the boat's side. Others, long-guns trained on the decks, remained in their saddles.

The masked raiders began to shout as they swarmed over the deck. Running sailors flashed out of nowhere, but immediately halted and meekly lifted their hands into the air. The captain was hustled forward, and the passengers, still in night clothes, were lined up near the rail.

River pirates. Outlaws who struck at ships from the land.

The raids had started suddenly a little more than six months before, and since then had become so frequent that the government as well as the steamboat lines was offering rewards for the capture of the pirate band. Yet so far not a single outlaw had even been identified, and more and more boats were plundered each week. And the gang or gangs had begun to strike recklessly, almost openly, often leaving behind death in addition to disaster.

So, this was what the pirates were like! Swooping down only when they were sure the boats and the people on it were asleep or defenseless. . . .

TWO of the outlaws on the Lady Jane were moving along the line of gun-cowed passengers, taking wallets, jewels and personal possessions, and jabbing revolver muzzles into the more reluctant victims.

A gangplank had been run out from below, and the boat's crew was being forced to carry the cargo ashore. Barrels, boxes, sacks, cases of merchandise. Three big, heavy-wheeled wagons rolled across the muddy bank and stopped, and the sailors obediently began to load them with the stolen cargo.

"Kelsey!" The sudden shout came from the deck, rolling with a quality of surging laughter. "Keep your eyes peeled."

One of the waiting horsemen waved in answer and wheeled around to look searchingly along the river bank. His glance swept in a half circle, then stopped and remained fixed. He appeared to be staring directly at Albora!

Her breath slowed and chill shock struck through her, but automatically she slid from the saddle and dropped to her hands and

knees. The brush was a thick, dense curtain of safety, that would hide her until the outlaws left. As soon as they were gone, she would ride back down-river and notify the sheriff. No, that wouldn't be necessary. The captain of the *Lady Jane* would probably send some of his men for help.

An echo started up in her brain. A growing, startling echo of the voice that had sung with laughter as it called: "Kelsey, keep your eyes peeled."

But she had only imagined that the voice was disturbingly familiar. In spite of its rich and peculiar lilt, it had been nothing at all like Hank Ferrier's voice. That was ridiculous. She had probably been thinking of Hank, and the thought had colored her reaction to the river pirate's voice. Yet her narrow black eyebrows pushed together uneasily, and she began to edge through the brush toward the river.

Moving carefully through the tall weeds, she worked her way along the point until she was close enough to see the terror on the faces of the passengers.

Cargo was still being unloaded, and a second gangplank had been attached to the upper deck. A man was standing near the top of it, his back toward Albora as he faced the huddled passengers. A man with a body that made his flannel shirt and jeans seem a dramatic, almost swashbuckling costume.

The girl's throat closed until each breath was a separate, tearing pain. She fought back the pain and held onto reality. Hank looked like that—almost magnificently built—but so did hundreds of others. Even a river raider might possess a certain physical splendor.

Her eyes were fixed on him with an intensity that made them ache. There was no reason to wonder about the similarity, but she wanted to see his face. Even with the neckerchief masking the lower part of it, she would know Hank's face. . . .

He moved restlessly then, and turned directly toward her. She saw the dark, down-bent eyebrows, the shape of the eyes and the straight, almost chiseled line of his nose.

Great, unseen hands caught her between them and closed on her with crushing strength. The pain turned into stabbing knives. It *was* Hank. Her Hank. . . .

Then the sight of him blotted out. Huge clouds of gray river mist seemed to move over her and sweep on to cover the sky. Hank was gone and the mist had become fog wrapping chokingly around her. Earth and sky, the world itself, had dissolved into gray emptiness. . . .

But the outlaw on the *Lady Jane* wasn't Hank—he couldn't be! He was a stranger. Someone she had never seen until a moment ago. . . . She closed her eyes against the fog and waited for the terrible moment to pass. And when her eyes opened again, the thick mist had disappeared and the world had returned.

She was still lying on the ground above the churning, yellow river. The *Lady Jane,* with Hank Ferrier aboard, was still tied to the opposite bank. The three big, heavy-wheeled wagons, filled with the stolen cargo, were starting to jolt through the mud, away from the boat.

Hank ran down the gangplank to his waiting pony and the other outlaws followed. He swung into his saddle and called laughingly, "So long, folks. Pleasant voyage!"

Flipping up his gun, he sent bullets crashing high over the deck. His companions roared with amusement and also pelted the air with lead. Finally they wheeled and rode off at top speed until they disappeared beyond the brushy slope. The echo of their ponies' hoofs diminished. Then it stopped, and the sound of hysterical feminine weeping came from the *Lady Jane.*

SLOWLY, heavily, Albora pulled herself to her feet and stared unseeingly at the brush that rose like a wall around her. Why was she staying here, waiting here? There was nothing to wait for.

The thought cut off. Even the pain and confusion stopped. She went still, nerves tightening, senses filled with the stark awareness of danger. A danger close enough to reach or touch her. Suddenly, terrifyingly, she knew someone else was hidden in the brush, watching her. . . .

The pulsing of her heart hammered noisily in her ears, but she drew a slow, steadying breath and her eyes flicked intently over the brush. There should be some sound, some whisper of movement.

Her hurrying glance halted. A few feet away the weeds were oddly hummocked, and freshly broken bits of twigs dangled from them.

"Over here, ma'am."

The low, quiet words came from the hummock of brush. Yet she could see nothing except a vague not quite natural pattern. Her nerves stretched taut. A stranger hiding out in the brush might be anything from a wandering "river rat" to a lookout for the river pirates.

The weeds crackled and a man stepped out and grinned at her. He, too, was near enough to the end of the point to have watched the outlaws raid the steamboat.

"Hello. I—I couldn't see you." She threw out the covering words automatically as her glance ran swiftly over him, searching for a signal of what might come.

"Hello, yourself!" His slow grin widened. "My name's Ty Patterson. I must say I'm sure glad I stopped right here."

He was fairish, dressed in the customary river-range flannel shirt and jeans. No neckerchief, though, and his high-heeled boots looked new. He wore a heavy gun in a holster tied down against his thigh.

"It's all right, ma'am, relax," he said. "You seem upset—just as upset as you looked when you first came scrambling through the brush."

"Then you must have been here when I arrived."

"Yes."

His eyes were frost-blue and set deeply above prominent cheek bones. Surprisingly, their frosty glint was a sparkling glow behind their surface. Yet they were too seeking, and almost hawk-like in their clarity. The eagle look about him was continued in the thin, aquiline nose and lean cheeks, but there was composure in the shape of his mouth, too. Controlled, determined composure.

Her glance dropped, instinctively, to the holstered gun. "You saw what happened to the *Lady Jane?*"

He nodded and his glance took hers and pulled it down into the sparkling frost in the depths of his eyes. "Yes." His lips stirred into a slow smile. "But one gun against that murderous gang would have been worse than useless. It might even have meant that some of the passengers would be hurt or killed. In that kind of gun battle bullets can hit the wrong target."

Murderous gang. Hank Ferrier was one of them. The giant hands were reaching for her again, ready to crush and torture. Strange, unreal fog was rolling over her, smothering her.

"Hey, don't do that!" Patterson stepped forward and put an arm around her to steady her. "The raid on *Lady Jane* wasn't a pretty sight, but please don't let it make you faint."

Albora opened her eyes and tilted her lips into the shape of a smile. "I'm—all right. I wasn't going to faint."

"I'm not so sure." He eased her gently to the ground, kneeling beside her. "I'll get some water. I brought a canteen with me, and my pony's only a few yards away."

"No!" Her voice was tremulous. "I'm fine—really. Besides, it's time for me to leave."

"You're not leaving yet." The words were a crisp, undeniable command. "Sit right where you are for a minute."

Getting to his feet, he began to trample down the brush and weeds around her, flattening them to make a smooth, soft place for her to lie.

"There you are. Stretch out and rest. In fifteen minutes you'll feel like new."

SHE shook her head. "I'm sorry, but I have to get to the wood station at Walnut Branch. The *Lady Jane* will put in for fuel, regardless of the raid, and I'm supposed to supervise the loading job."

"The *Lady Jane* will probably stay tied up for another hour. Even if she doesn't, what's the difference? All the wood stations I've seen simply leave the wood piled on the banks and the sailors carry it to the boat."

"I know, but—"

"Lie back," he broke in. "You might as well rest while you're objecting."

He grinned his odd, slow grin. Even when his mouth relaxed it was strong and steady. A clean-edged mouth, fuller and younger, more sensitive than she had thought. Yet the ice was still in his eyes and his face seemed sharper, more aquiline. Eagles, she thought, hunted from the loftiest mountain tops and were aristocratically scornful of the earth. They never swooped down on stricken or helpless prey after the fashion of river outlaws. . . .

She leaned back obediently, and the bent weeds and brush felt pleasantly, springily soft.

"That's it," he said approvingly. Settling down beside her, he sprawled, full-length, on the wide shelf of weeds.

Albora lowered her eyelids and watched him through her lashes. Arms folded under his head, he was looking up at the morning sky, his face quiet and yet alert, as if ready or waiting for what might come.

"So the *Lady Jane* got it again," he murmured. "The third time in less than a month."

"Three times in a single month?"

He nodded, still watching the sky. "After each raid she put back to St. Charles. No use going on without cargo or supplies for the passengers."

Her amber eyes darkened. "If it gets any worse, the steamboats may stop running, and there simply won't be any river transportation." She went on, in lowered tones: "There must be a dozen outlaw gangs operating along the Missouri now."

As she said it, she was thinking that Hank belonged to one of the gangs. An outlaw not only threatening life and property but endangering the very existence of the people around him, of his own neighbors.

Patterson turned his head and regarded her with clear, frosted-blue eyes. "I figure there's not more than three gangs working the river—probably only one or two. But they're big outfits and one of them, at least, is equipped like a small army. They have everything from guns and fast ponies to specially built wagons. Their hideouts are arranged and ready in advance. All of that adds up to a lot of money."

"They ought to have plenty of money, considering what they've stolen." Her voice thinned and stopped. Hank's gang, the outlaws who had boarded the *Lady Jane,* had used new modern wagons, and had ridden fast, sleek ponies. *Hank.*

"Let's not talk about it any more," she said. "I don't want to remember it."

The distant, icy sparkle behind the surface of his eyes changed into the glow of far, white fire. "I'd rather forget it, too. But I'd like remembering your name—if I knew it."

Her lashes moved together and her cornelian lips tilted. "It's easy to remember. Albora Cleveland."

"Albora," he repeated. "That's as contradictory as everything else about you. A girl with hair that's kind of like blonde sandalwood and eyes that are—" He broke off and grinned. But the grin was oddly quiet, almost still.

"Like what?" she asked. "Couldn't you just call them brown and let it go at that?"

"No, because they're not brown. They're the color of afternoon shadows. Deep afternoon shadows. They make me think of

things like Old Spain and waiting, dark-eyed ladies."

"Waiting? Always?"

"Some of them. That's why the afternoon shadows are in their eyes."

HER head tilted back as she laughed and her throat became a full, taut curve of apricot satin. "Sounds dull," she said, sitting up. "Even the wood station's more exciting than that."

"Where'd you say that wood station is?"

"Up-river, at Walnut Branch. Our Twisted T range runs almost to the bank. We have a lot of timberland, so we sell wood to the steamships. Now I really must go. Good-by and—"

"You haven't explained your name," he broke in. "Albora Cleveland is a rather odd combination, much as I like it."

She smiled. "That's because my parents are a strange combination. My mother's Spanish, my father's from New England. He wanted to name me Prudence, but Mother insisted on something more exotic, and Albora it was."

"So I wasn't wrong about Old Spain and the dark-eyed ladies!" Then, seeing she was getting to her feet, he rose too. "No, don't go yet," he said. "Aren't you at all curious about *me*? Not many strangers show up in this part of the country, yet I, a stranger, just crawled out of the brush at your feet. Don't you wonder what I'm doing here?"

"Well . . ." Her lashes lowered over her long amber eyes as she studied him. "This is also a country in which questions aren't asked."

"In that case, I'll volunteer the answers. I came here two days ago from Washington."

She regarded him with polite interest.

"Would you like to know why I left Washington to come out here to the Missouri River country?"

"Of course." She smiled a little more brightly. "Please go on."

"Glad to. The government sent me to survey the river—from now on, believe it or not. As one of the hired hands I was doing all right, I thought, where I was. But some congressmen suddenly heard about the Misouri River and got all upset. They'd been told that it constantly spreads out to cut away more land, and even changes its course. They want to be sure just where the river is, and they sent me out to keep track of it. I'm to survey, measure, judge and observe, and send monthly reports."

"It doesn't sound like too bad a job."

"It's not. In fact, it's the best one I ever had—and I just found that out. Albora, I'm not thinking of Old Spain or waiting ladies now. The past doesn't mean a thing—because I suddenly realize that this second *is* life. The second we're living right now may be all—or the most important part of—existence."

Her mouth straightened and uneasiness touched her. He was standing close to her, so close that if he lifted his hand he could touch her. And his nearness seemed natural, even pleasant. Her glance moved uncertainly over him. Over the spare-fleshed face and the young, muscular throat. He was not as big as Hank nor as physically striking, but his compact, easy-lined body had the poise of hard, definite power. Even now as he stood relaxed beside her, there was an alert readiness about him.

"You may be right," she said briskly. "But there are other parts of life, and one of them, for me, is checking the loading of wood onto every boat putting in at the station."

His glance reached into her eyes and drove ice-bright fire into their depths. "If I was sure this *was* the only minute—the last one—of existence, I'd spend it kissing you," he said.

She met his eyes coolly. "Good-by. Thanks for the—the resting place."

"You're very welcome. I liked it, too."

Thin lines of crimson burned across her tanned cheeks. "Good-by," she repeated, and started swiftly through the brush.

"Good-by, Albora. If you don't mind, I'll drop in at the Twisted T tonight."

"No." She turned, sharply, to face him. "Not tonight, please. I'll be busy."

"Oh. Sorry, ma'am."

Had he also flushed? Had something young and sensitive left his face, flickered out of his eyes? She hesitated, and her lips stirred, seeking words. But a whistle blasted warningly from the river, announcing that the *Lady Jane,* after her ordeal of terror, was heading upstream. Instead of speaking, Albora moved hurriedly on to the trail.

CHAPTER TWO

Not Quite Good-by

AT WALNUT BRANCH, the trail dropped over the last low hill to muddy flats that stretched away from the river, and Albora saw that the *Lady Jane* was already being tied up near the wood station. The station consisted of piles of logs sawn into proper lengths and a tiny shack marked *Office.*

In a few minutes she would reach the shack and be told of the pirate raid, would see the shocked passengers and angry crew. She would have to listen silently and conceal her sick, shamed sense of guilt, for she couldn't tell them: *I recognized one of the outlaws. His name is Hank Ferrier and he lives on the Double F. Once he's arrested it shouldn't be hard to track down the others.*

No, she couldn't say that. Hank was part of her life. So was the crime he had committed.

She saw sailors were moving down the gangplank to the piles of wood, and, abruptly, she lifted the reins, wheeled and turned off onto the range. Cantering away from the trail, she circled south to a little-used wagon road that led to the Twisted T home range. She nudged her pony into a faster gait, but the echo of his hoofs was suddenly too loud. Loud and oddly blurred. She pulled down and listened. Someone was riding around the bend and heading up-trail. As she eased out the reins, the rider appeared.

He was a tall, wide-shouldered man who rode with peculiar grace. A man who, even at a distance, had a look of physical magnificence.

She stopped, bringing her pony to a hard, swift halt. So this was how it had to be. She must face Hank and the final showdown now.

"Albora!" he shouted and spurred his pony. "Albora!" His voice sang and laughed her name. And, as he pulled in beside her, the slightly crooked lines of his mouth tore at her heart.

"I intended to stop off at the wood station long enough to see you," he said, and his gray eyes blazed with the special light that was only for her. His hair was gleaming black silk and his darkly weathered face was very handsome. A straight, chiseled nose and a restless mouth that could grow crooked with amusement and arouse almost aching tenderness.

"So early in the day?" she asked, struggling to keep her voice steady.

His laughter surged. "What's time got to do with it? Albora, lovely, I think of you every minute, everywhere. But I'm not ducking my chores because I want to. The sheriff's sent out a call for possemen. We're to meet a mile above Walnut Branch." As he finished, he leaned forward and his arms went around her to lift her from the saddle.

His face brushed her cheek, the scent of his skin and hair whipped at her senses. The restless, strongly curved mouth was almost touching her own. If she were to kiss him, that would be the only reality and everything else would be forgotten. . . .

"No." The voice which came from her lips was an alien, ugly sound. "No, Hank. Let me go."

Something flickered across his face. Something that might have been both fear

and anger. But he released her and asked: "What's wrong? What's happened?"

"I—" She pulled her glance away from him and fixed her eyes straight ahead. "You said the sheriff had sent out a call for possemen. *You're* going to join the posse?"

"Sure. One of the Broken C boys came by and said the sheriff wanted every man he could get."

"But *you*—" The rest of her words caught and smothered in her throat.

"Say, what is this, honey? You're all worked up."

"We've got to talk, Hank. Let's get off the wagon road."

"You know I'd love to talk to you any time, honey, but that posse won't wait."

"Please, Hank. It has to be now."

Quickly, she sent her pony across the stubbled range to a thick stand of cottonwoods. The shaded earth around the trees was covered with grass, and Albora, getting down, walked to the far edge of the grass. She waited there, and a moment later Hank came up and stood beside her, frowning.

"All right, honey," he said. "What is it?"

Albora's hands closed over each other. "The steamboat *Lady Jane* was raided by river pirates a little while ago," she said finally, making herself look at him.

He stared at her, looking shocked. "The *Lady Jane*, again! That must be the reason for the call for possemen, then. Gosh, raiders seem to love that boat!"

"These weren't real river pirates. They looked like cowboys—range-country outlaws."

His gray eyes sharpened but his face was blandly unrevealing. "You sound almost as if you'd been there," he said and his voice lifted teasingly.

"I was. I saw the whole thing from the top of Narrow Point. And, Hank, I saw you. *You* were one of the outlaws."

"I?" He stared at her but his eyes filled with sudden shadows. "*I* was one of them!" He shot to his feet. "Have you gone crazy?"

"I wish I had. That would be easier."

"But—Albora!" He caught her hands and lifted her up to her feet. "Look at me. How can you say such loco stuff?"

"Stop it, Hank! I *saw* you."

"You didn't. You couldn't have recognized any of the gang. Outlaws don't go around letting people know who they are. They must have worn masks of some kind."

"The lower part of their faces were covered by their neckerchiefs, but I saw enough to recognize you. It *was* you. Now, let me go."

THE strange new shadows left his eyes and light blazed into them. The special light that was only for her.

"Albora, lovely, this is plain silly. Let's forget it." His arms claimed her, held her tightly against him, and he bent to take her mouth.

"Don't kiss me, Hank." Her voice was empty, toneless.

He stared down into her face, his arms loosening and falling away from her. "I don't know just what you're trying to do, but if this is your way of trying to get rid of me . . . Is that the answer? Have you suddenly changed your mind about me?"

"I didn't promise to marry an outlaw."

He straightened, his body looking erect, and almost poignantly splendid. "Why not tell the truth? Just say you don't love me any longer."

Her parted lips shook as furious words stormed against them. But instead of speaking, she turned and walked toward her pony.

"Albora!" His hands caught her, closed and held her with bruising fierceness. "I won't let you go. I can't!"

"You'll have to." She struggled against his nearness and his touch, and a deep, aching need that somehow was also pity.

"Sweet . . ." Forcing her into his arms, he bent, and with the gesture of a desperate child, pressed his head against her shoulder. "What would I do without you?"

She closed her eyes and fought her weakness. "This is no good. Let me go."

"No. Listen to me. I wanted to make money, fast, for you—for us. I got tired of waiting. I want you for my wife now, not years from now. I took the only way there was. If I didn't love you, nothing could have made me do it."

Something within her sagged and collapsed. His face was still pressed against her shoulder, like that of a terrified child. And she wanted to reassure him, comfort him, give him courage. The terrible tenderness could still live even without hope or faith or respect.

"We won't talk about it any more—now," she said at last. "Later, sometime when we're less confused, we can—decide what to do."

His head lifted and his arms tightened, and then his mouth moved down to hers. His kiss was crushing, claiming. It caught and held her senses, set her flesh afire and turned her blood into fiercely beating tom-toms.

She forgot he was an outlaw, a member of a ruthless pirate gang. The tom-toms were pounding even more crazily, thudding through her brain and echoing in her ears. . . . Her eyelids drooped and her mouth stirred under his, moved in blazing, reckless answer.

When the kiss ended, his mouth left hers slowly and he murmured, "We'll forget we ever heard of the *Lady Jane,* darling. We'll forget anything happened to her."

The words aroused her, brought her coldly and sharply back to reality. She stepped back out of his arms. "Hank, what are you going to do about it?"

"Do?" His voice was startled. "What do you want me to do, Albora—admit I was mixed up with a gang of river raiders? Walk into the sheriff's office and tell him? That'd mean spending the rest of my life in prison!"

The rest of his life. Of her life. . . . But the words drove stubbornly through the new, bleak fear she felt in her heart.

"Then there isn't any answer. I can't go on loving an outlaw."

"You won't have to. You'll never catch me again in anything of the kind. Never. I swear to that."

Her amber eyes searched his, uncertainly, gropingly. "You make it sound so simple," she said at last. "But piracy—"

"Darling." His voice struck hurriedly across hers. "I've given you my word. What happened is out of our lives—already too far behind ever to touch us. Why can't we leave it where it belongs—in the past?"

"But what of your—of the gang that raided the *Lady Jane? They* won't stop. And because you were one of them and know who they are, you'll always be a little responsible for their future crimes."

His head jerked up as if he had been struck. "If you're asking me to turn them over to the law, the answer is no. That's something a man can't do! Sweet . . ." He reached for her again, and again his arms claimed her and his warmth shook her flesh. "We left the whole thing in the past. So far in the past that it's no longer any part of our lives. . . ."

ALBORA was setting the supper table when her father, a big, impatient man, burst into the dining room. "The *Lady Jane* was held up this morning!" he announced. "Not far from Walnut Branch. You must have been at the wood station about the same time. Did you see anything? Or hear any gunplay?"

Her hesitation was so brief as to be unnoticeable. "I didn't go to the wood station today."

"You didn't? Albora! You know I don't do business that way. Just leaving the wood there for the ships' crew to handle is slack. I—"

His wife interrupted him as she brought the soup from the kitchen. "Sit down, Dave. Or haven't you washed? Hurry, everything'll be cold."

Dave Cleveland's lantern-jawed face set. "Not until I find out why Albora didn't go to the wood station today."

"Albora had a headache, and now I'm glad she did. Would you have wanted her there when the boat was raided? She might've been shot or hurt."

"Still—"

"Come, Albora." Luisa Cleveland seated herself at the foot of the table. "We'll start our supper. Your father will join us later."

Her amber-brown eyes smiled at Albora. Luisa, whose family had been among the earliest of California's Spanish settlers, had not only remained beautiful through the years, but had managed to stay completely unruffled by her husband's New England sternness.

When Dave Cleveland finally settled stiffly into his chair, his wife said softly: "Tell us about the *Lady Jane,* dear. Is there any chance of the outlaws being caught? It seems to me it's going to the point where every ship that starts up the river is being robbed."

"Not quite," he told her. "Some of 'em seem to get along without any trouble at all. There are plenty of river pirates around all right, and lately they've been working overtime, but there are some peculiar angles to today's job. With all the outlaw gangs that're working the river, no other ship is raided as often as the *Lady Jane.* Even after she was held up the last time, four or five weeks ago, there was some ugly talk. The insurance company started an investigation, too. The company that owns her is a little outfit. She's their only boat. A small concern working on a shoestring and trying to compete with big operators like the Benedict Line must get hard up for cash at times."

"What does that mean?"

"It could mean the owner of the *Lady Jane* was *too* hard up. An outlaw gang might be willing to split the profits on a job if things were made easy for them or they were guaranteed complete safety. For instance, even through the *Lady Jane* had already been raided several times, the crew was unarmed. And there wasn't a single gun, of any kind, aboard."

"Dad." Albora's voice was thin and bodiless. "Do you mean the owner actually *hired* the outlaws?"

"Don't know. I'm just repeating what I've heard in St. Charles and all along the river. But insurance companies usually have a reason for getting suspicious. If they cancel the insurance on the *Lady Jane,* that'll be the end of both her and the owner."

"Who is the owner?"

Dave Cleveland shook his head. "Never heard his name. Might be more than one. The ship's registered as belonging to the Missouri Steamship Company,"

A minute or so later, the front door-knocker banged.

"Sounds like Hank," her father grinned. "Expecting him?"

"No. That is, not until later."

But it was Hank. When she opened the door, he lifted her up into his arms and laughed as he kissed her.

"Put me down!" she whispered. "Dad can see us from the dining room."

His laughter swelled. "What's wrong with that?" he demanded, and kissed her again.

Flushing, she twisted out of his arms and said breathlessly: "Come in. You're just in time for supper."

"I'd like to, but I can't. I'm starting for St. Charles. That's what I came to tell you."

"St. Charles! Tonight?"

He nodded. "I want to get there early in the morning so I can start back before noon."

"But why do you have to go?"

He straightened, and the laughter left his mouth and something like anger flickered through his eyes. "Business," he said. "I'm sorry, Albora. You know I'd rather be with you."

"Hank." The color dropped out of her face, leaving it white and tense. "We agreed that—the thing that happened was in the past, that we'd keep it there until it was forgotten. But if the trip to St. Charles has anything to do with *that* . . ."

"It hasn't," he broke in quickly. "It has nothing to do with it." But his eyes had darkened. Filled with strange, alien shadows.

"Yes, you *said* it was over and done with, and I believed you. But if you're not telling the truth—"

"Albora!" His voice slashed through hers again. "Don't call me a liar!"

"Then what's the reason for the trip to St. Charles?"

He hesitated. Finally his shoulders lifted impatiently, wearily. "All right. I didn't want to talk about it until the deal was closed, but I heard, just this afternoon, that one of the biggest cattlemen in the territory is thinning out his herds. He's selling cheap. Unloading below the market. And there isn't any better seed stock in the West. I figured on picking up fifty or a hundred head."

"A hundred head! How can you pay for them?" Her words slowed and stopped. "Unless," she went on, "you got the money suddenly, after the *Lady Jane* was raided!"

"So you still don't believe me!" His gray eyes bored desperately into hers. "Some day you will believe me—I'll see to that. But right now, Albora, I've got to get started. We'll have more time for talking tomorrow." His mouth, crooked, laughing, tormenting, crushed down on hers, and then he was gone.

She stared at the door he had closed behind him and listened to the clatter of his pony's hoofs. He was riding through the gates now, onto the wagon road. Once more the world dropped away and she was caught in thick, chilling fog. A choking, terrifying mist. Hank hadn't told the truth.

But he did! The silent cry rang fiercely through her brain. *He wouldn't lie to me now. He couldn't!* But the smothering fog pressed closer. Why had he been so reluctant, so vague?

CHAPTER THREE

Stolen Kisses

ANGER suddenly stormed to life in Albora and shattered the imprisoning mist of fear. She had to know whether Hank was really going to St. Charles and why. Otherwise, every minute ahead of her would be a torturous war between doubt and faith. Life would mean only a succession of dark battlegrounds.

Whirling from the door, she ran through the hall to her room and got out her saddle clothes. Dressing hurriedly in shirt and jeans, she pulled on her boots, picked up a hat and started from the room. At the door she paused, then turned back, went to the dresser and took a gun and belt from the lower drawer. Quickly threading on the holster, she put on the belt and pushed the revolver into place.

As she reached for her hat, her eyes were caught by the reflection in the mirror. The lamplight made her hair silver bright, but her eyes looked black. Long, still and even darker than fear. Her mouth seemed different, too. In spite of its cornelian vividness, it looked cold. Quietly cold. Was she really like that? Silver, amber and pale apricot-gold, with a dreadful finality in her eyes.

Impatiently, she pulled on the wide-brimmed felt hat, and moved softly into the hall. Turning toward the rear of the house, she crossed the kitchen, and slipped out the back door.

At the corrals, the job of saddling her pony seemed endless, but finally she stepped up. To avoid passing the house, she wheeled directly onto the range, heading for the wagon road and prodding her mount at top speed.

Although the sun had set, daylight had

not dimmed and she could see the entire half mile of wagon road stretching from the Twisted T to High Mound turn. It was empty, which meant Hank was far ahead. She nudged her pony again and, pushing her eyelashes together, strained to see the curve where the trail swept out of sight behind High Mound. Was that vague shape a horseman?

Yes, it was. A tall rider on a big, rangy horse. And he was coming toward her. Hank was returning. He had probably realized how important—how cruelly important—it was for her to be sure.

Warmth lifted through her and the driving, aching tension ended. She waved and called. And the sound of his name soared into the air like an echo of his own laughter.

The approaching rider pulled off his hat and swept it high in answer. Then she realized that the man was not Hank Ferrier. Tall, but not as tall as Hank. Easy in the saddle, but without Hank's peculiar and almost exciting grace.

"Hi." The call came in resonant, steady tones. It was Ty Patterson.

He pulled in, his grin appearing slowly, his blue eyes holding far, frost-sparkled light. "That pony of yours is plenty fast. You must be in a hurry."

Disappointment and unreasoning anger had created surging turmoil in her brain, but as she met the blue-frost eyes, it ended and quiet touched her. An abrupt quiet that was deep as a realization of escape. Or of sudden freedom.

"I *was* in a hurry," she said. "Or thought so."

"Anything I can do? If it's important, I'll be glad to go for you or take a message to whoever you want to reach."

She shook her head. It was more important, more urgent, than anything in her life, but she suddenly knew she had lost too much time already. There was no longer any chance of overtaking Hank. She would never find him even if she rode all the way to St. Charles.

"No. I've changed my mind."

The blue glance moved over her face. "That was sudden," he murmured.

Instead of explaining, she said, "You're pretty far away from the river. Or haven't you started surveying it yet?"

"I got tired of looking at muddy water and headed up the first trail that might take me away from it. But if you're going south, I'm ready to ride that way, too."

"I'm turning back to the ranch." Then the sound of her own, unexpected words rang startlingly in her ears. "But couldn't you ride with me, anyhow?"

"Certainly. Just name the direction and I'll take it—as long as you're there." His grin was quicker and the frost-sparkle behind his eyes became the reflection of distant flame.

As they started north, dusk sifted through the fading light, and the long-risen moon, losing her pallor, took on full night brilliance. The quiet that had touched Albora deepened, and she was conscious of a new awareness. Life and the world had a definite pattern, a discernible rhythm of which she was a part. It was pleasant merely to be conscious of living, moving and breathing.

And it was difficult, now, to realize she had started frantically after Hank. Even if she had found him, nothing would have been answered or settled.

TURNING through the gates of the Twisted T, they left their ponies at the corral and walked back across the moon-bright yard to the house.

"Let's not go in," Albora said. "Right now, being inside would make me feel caged. Let's sit on the porch."

He pulled two chairs close to the railing. As she sat down, she wondered, suddenly, if Hank actually were on his way to St. Charles. He might have been deliberately concealing his real destination. The moonlight dimmed as if fog was rising against the sky. But he hadn't lied. There had been

no reason to lie. She had to learn to believe in him again, had to find the way back to sureness.

"Albora," Ty Patterson bent toward her. "Tell me about it."

"About—what?"

"The thing that's worrying you. Hurting you."

"There's nothing worrying me."

"When I met you on the trail you looked almost desperate. White and frightened. And you'd been riding so fast your pony wouldn't have lasted an hour. You're scared about something. I want to help you."

"Why?" She tried to make the word light but her voice shook and broke.

He bent over her, and his blue glance, driving down into her eyes, held distant fire. Fierce, northern fires blazing through barriers of ice.

"I could think of a hundred reasons, but the real one, the important one is *you*. You're beautiful and alive and a lot of other things, but that's still only part of it."

The moonlight gave a hard, proud line to his profile, and there were patches of shadow under the high cheek bones. Would those shadows change or break apart if they were touched? If she were to touch them, would the lean flesh beneath be as cool as the ice-blue of his eyes?

She moved farther back into her chair and forced her lips into the shape of a smile. "I'm never satisfied with knowing merely *part* of anything. I'm too curious."

"The rest isn't easy to explain." The fires in his eyes were close and bright, reaching past her thoughts to a hidden part of herself; finding and touching it. "But I came near it this morning, on Narrow Point, when I said that if I had only a single minute to live, I'd want to spend the minute with you."

His breath was on her cheek. And his face was suddenly that of a sensitive boy. His eyes held something more overwhelming than fire. In them was the thing that should be forever hidden—a man's secret, impossible dream, never to be realized, yet never to be lost. The ice barriers had melted. . . .

Albora's breath was a swelling pulse in her throat as, with a sense of panic, she forced out meaningless words to form a wall between them. "Would that be a real test? Almost anyone could be good company for a single minute."

"When we were on Narrow Point this morning," he went on as if he had not heard her, "I wanted to pick you up in my arms and take you away with me—by force, if necessary. It happened to me as fast as that." Then his voice dropped to resonant darkness, and he whispered, "Albora."

She straightened and her hands closed on the arms of her chair. She must get up and go into the house. Must tell him good night with brief finality. But she could not free herself from what was in his face and in his eyes; from the revelation of the blazing, overpowering dream. A dream that was high, proud, fiercely free and also humbly tender. . . .

His hands touched her and he lifted her into his arms. Flame was a cascading, rhythmic pulse, like the wild drive of his heart pounding against hers. His lips took hers almost quietly and with odd steadiness. Reassuring steadiness which made her remember the composure of his mouth, the frost-blue of his eyes. A feeling of renewal lifted her into bouyant awareness.

The pressure of his mouth changed, the flame deepening and darkening. North-fierce white fire swept over her senses and commanded them, until even the night itself was lost in the holocaust.

"Albora." Ty Patterson's husky, unsteady voice made her realize that the kiss had ended. The storm of flame and ice and recklessness was over.

Freeing herself, she turned away from him, walked to the door and said, as she had intended to say—as she should have said—long ago, "Good night."

"Come back here!"

The hard, snapped command spun her around. She stared at him and her chin tilted. "I said good night and I meant good-by."

Patterson's hands closed on her shoulders, gripped them hard as he looked down into her face. "You didn't really mean that," he said. "This is it, Albora. Even if you didn't want it—or don't like it. That doesn't matter. It's happened. From now on it's us. It'll always be us."

Us. Mine. Words all men used. Hank used them, too. Sometimes, as he spoke them, his mouth turned crooked with laughter and aroused pain-sharp tenderness. Tomorrow, when he returned, she would once more be sure about him. If she could really be sure. . . .

"Look at me!" Ty Patterson demanded.

"All right." Her eyes met his. "But it can't be the way you want it. I don't know what made me forget that and—and go a little crazy. But we won't see each other again."

His hands opened and dropped away from her. "Another man," he said tonelessly.

"Yes. I—we're engaged."

He was silent, the frost-blue glance driving against the surface of her eyes. Finally, he said, "You're sure? Certain he's the one for you?"

Her lips broke apart and stirred into the shape of words, but no sound came from them. She nodded silently.

He turned at last and went down the steps, starting across the yard for the pony he had left at the corrals. And as he walked away from her, he looked very tall and straight. Proudly, soaringly free. . . .

ALBORA pulled a sheer, mint-green frock over her head, fastened it and sat down before the mirror. But as she started to brush her sandalwood hair, she halted with surprise in her eyes and studied her own reflection. Why was she dressing so carefully for an evening she would spend alone? Hank had left for St. Charles—again. And, once more, his explanation of the trip had been vague and casual.

When she had reminded him that the previous journey to St. Charles had been to buy stock, he had turned irritable. "Do think I've forgotten?" he demanded. "The deal hasn't been closed yet. I want the stock at my price. Do I have to make constant explanations?"

The mirror before her seemed to darken as if mist—gray, frightening fog—were drifting across it. She straightened, brushed her hair, pinned it into a smooth roll at the nape of her neck and hurried from the room. Maybe outside, in the early evening air, the endless questions would stop shuttling through her brain.

As she went through the front door onto the porch, her father, with his restless, thrusting stride, came stamping up the steps. "Going some place?" he demanded.

"No."

"If you change your mind, take a gun. After this don't leave the spread without one. I don't like the looks of things at all."

"*What* things?"

"In the last couple of days I've seen three strangers drifting around this range, and all of 'em looked like gun-fighters. Maybe the river gangs are getting set to pull off some land jobs. This would be a perfect spot for rustling. Once the cattle are across the river, they're out of the territory."

"Dad, you're hunting for something to worry about."

"Am I? Another boat was raided this morning—about five miles from Walnut Branch. Criminals seem to do what they please in this country. Why shouldn't they start on the range?" And he moved on impatiently into the house.

Another boat. Masked men with spitting guns swarming over another helpless, landbound steamer. Roaring, threatening, shouting. Maybe one of them had laughed with surging, singing recklessness. . . . She went down the steps and started for range

lane, but the air had chilled and dusk was falling too swiftly. She quickened her stride as if to escape from the twilight shadows, but there was even deeper gloom at the end of the lane. Restless, stirring gloom.

She stopped. Had something moved against the dusk? That long, dense patch of shadow had taken on the outline of a man—a tall man with sweeping shoulders and a gracefully poised body. The shadow patch changed and edged toward her. It was a man. Hank Ferrier!

"Hank!" She ran toward him. "I thought you were going to St. Charles."

"Sure you did." He stepped out into the dim light, his mouth strangely twisted, his eyes looking as if they were blind. "That's why you're all dressed up—for Ty Patterson! Is this your regular meeting place?"

"Patterson? Ty Patterson?" she asked and surprise made her voice waver.

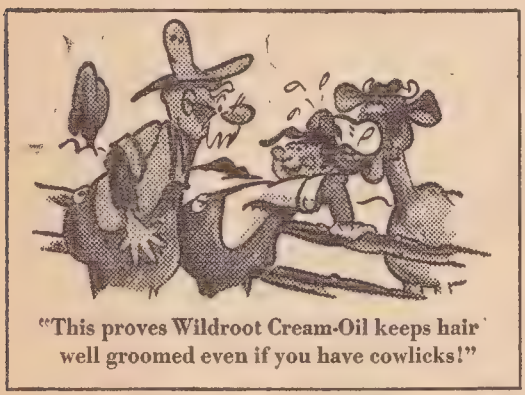
"Yes! The surveyor bird, the pretty-haired lad you've been seeing on the sly. I know all about him. I've made it my business to find out."

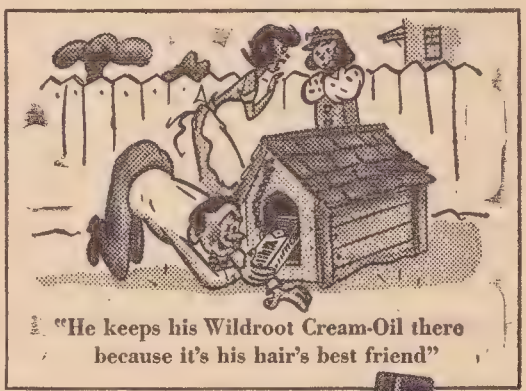
Albora's lips broke apart over angrily rushing words but she closed them again and finally said, "I've met Ty Patterson just twice, and there was nothing sly about either meeting."

"Twice! Listen to me." He caught her arm, his tightening fingers crushing the flesh. "I got wise the first night I went to St. Charles, when he passed me on the trail. I wondered why a stranger was heading for the Twisted T. So I turned back and hung around long enough to see you ride out to meet him—lead him to the ranch! Other nights I've drifted over this way, too, to find out what was going on—and I've seen plenty. Patterson was here again last night after you got rid of me."

"That's not true. Hank, what's the matter? What's happened to you?"

"You ought to know. When I left you last night I only went as far as the wagon





road. But I didn't have to wait long for Patterson to show up. He left his pony outside the gates and walked into the yard. I got out then because if I'd stayed another minute I'd have killed him."

ALBORA drew a long, slow breath and forced back her own flaring anger. "You're hurting my arm. Let me go."

"Not until you stop lying! You've been tricking me, haven't you? Patterson's the boy now, isn't he?"

"I can't believe this is happening." Her voice dropped to a low, thick whisper. "You really think I'd lie and cheat?"

"I know it!" He released her arm but his hands clamped down on her shoulders. "I'll force the truth out of you! Shake it out!"

She became completely motionless under his grip. Stillness, deadly stillness, spread through her until it reached her senses and emptied them. Was this man with the white, savagely distorted face the one she loved? Could eyes filled with such raw hatred ever have held tenderness?

The Hank Ferrier she had known had always been assured. Almost arrogantly assured. But, if his attitude had been tinged with command, it had been covered with a special warmth. Or, more rarely, he had been wistfully, pleadingly contrite. But even then he had felt himself to be in control of the situation and of her. Now that he believed that control was lost, he was raging as wildly and helplessly as a child in a tantrum.

Even after she had seen him taking part in the robbery of the *Lady Jane*, she had agreed to go on loving him. In the struggle to regain belief in him, part of herself had been lost. Yet with his own sense of possession shaken, he had become as primitive and snarling as a wolf driven from the pack.

"You'll force nothing out of me, Hank, because there's no longer any need to explain or deny anything. Your behavior tonight has shown us both we don't belong together. We have to realize that fact and accept it." Her words were even and emotionless.

His eyes fixed on hers and, abruptly, the fury went out of him. His hands loosened. "Don't talk that way. I love you. I love you so much that just the thought of another man makes me loco. Sweet, beautiful —" his arms went gently around her— "I'm sorry. It'll never happen again. I promise." He bent his head to take her mouth.

"No, Hank. And there's no reason to be sorry. It's not the fault of either of us, although we should have realized long ago that we're wrong for each other. *I* should have realized it. But at last I know. Nothing will ever change my mind."

"I don't believe it! You're just paying me back. But it's all right. I deserve worse than that."

She moved quietly out of his arms. "We don't love each other, Hank. This is good-by."

"It's *only* good night. There isn't going to be any good-by. In the morning, when you've stopped being mad, you'll agree with me. I'll be back tomorrow night."

She was silent and his glance moved, searchingly, over her face. Finally he said, uneasily, "I'll take you back to the house."

"No. Please go now, quickly."

"Sure." Anger touched him again and he swung sharply away from her. "But I'll still come back tomorrow!"

CHAPTER FOUR

The Owner of the Lady Jane

ALBORA awoke with a sense of bouyant well-being and new, almost exciting freedom. The morning was a fragrance in her nostrils and a rich taste in her mouth. Getting out of bed, she caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror and smiled at her own reflection. She might go into town and shop for a new hat.

A really gay, special hat, the kind that would bring a frosty blue sparkle into a man's eyes.

And then she remembered. Hank hadn't understood or accepted her decision. *I'll be back tomorrow.* But he couldn't come back. She had to make that unmistakably clear.

Dressed in saddle clothes, she ate a hurried breakfast and rode to the wood station at Walnut Branch. Two ships put in and she dutifully checked the fuel loads. At noon, she saddled the pony she had left in the tiny corral behind the office and started for Hank's Double F.

Half a mile from the station, she turned off the river road and followed a shortcut across range to Half Way Forks, where she swung west toward the Double F ranch house. But as she rode into the yard, she suddenly pulled her pony down to a walk.

A two-horse buckboard was drawn up before the ranch house door. A glossy, gleaming, specially built buckboard that was the most impressive she had ever seen. The horses were also a symbol of wealth. Sturdy grays, perfectly matched as to size and color.

Hank must be entertaining a most important visitor, one who had come from quite a distance, for no one in the county owned such a rig. This was not the time to have their final understanding.

But as she wheeled away from the house, the door opened.

"Albora!" Hank Ferrier hurried out to meet her. "I'm sure glad to see you, honey." The words laughed and sang through his lips, as he started to lift her from the saddle.

"You have a guest, so I'll make it some other time," she told him.

"I'll be over tonight."

"That's just what I—"

She broke off as a middle-aged man emerged from the house. A gray-haired, full-bodied man dressed in expensive but rumpled clothing.

"Hank, I couldn't wait to meet such a beautiful young lady. I just had to come out."

Ferrier looked almost startled. "Why—that's all right," he said, speaking too swifty. "Albora, this is Anthony Benedict."

"How do you do!" Benedict's handshake was more than enthusiastic. "You're the prettiest thing I've ever seen, ma'am." His heavily fleshed face was jovial, but his eyes, peering through drooping, puffy lids, were vulpine-bright.

"Anthony Benedict," the girl repeated, smiling. "That name sounds very familiar." Her words broke off and then rushed on, in surprise. "Isn't there a Benedict Steamship Company?"

He chuckled throatily. "There is, my dear, there is. It's my company."

Her glance flicked to Hank, whose eyes seemed strangely shadowed.

"Mr. Benedict and my father were friends," he told her, and again his words were hurried. "He didn't even know I was in the territory until we ran into each other in St. Charles."

"Exactly," Benedict said. "Imagine finding the son of my best friend out here on the Missouri River! Hadn't seen him since he was small, but recognized him at once. He looks just like his father, you know."

Albora smiled. "It was nice meeting you," she murmured and turned to her pony.

"I'll saddle and take you home," Hank said. "You don't mind, do you, Tony? Stick around—I won't be gone long."

"I'll wait." Benedict's grin was almost beaming. "But you'd be a fool to hurry back, away from such charming company. Good-by, Miss Cleveland. Seeing you has been the best thing that's happened to me in a long time."

"Thank you." She returned his smile and walked her pony across the yard to the wagon road, where she pulled in to wait for Hank.

WHEN he joined her, his mouth was crooked with laughter and his gray eyes held the light that had once seemed special. "Old Tony'll be around often now," he chuckled. "Pretty girls are his weakness."

Albora sent her pony into a canter. When the Double F home ranch was well behind them, she stopped at the edge of the brush-ined trail.

"Hank, let's get this over with, fast. I meant what I said last night. I'm not going to marry you—ever."

"Now, honey—"

"Please let me finish. Let's not have any more discussions. It's over and done with. You've got to let it go at that."

He stared down at her. "I've *got* to let it go at that." Anger flickered whitely across his face. "That sounds like an order!"

"Hank—"

His voice thrust hers aside. "You've always been high-handed, Albora, but this time you've gone too far." And stepping to the ground, he strode around her pony and reached up to lift her from the saddle.

"I'm not getting down. Nor listening to anything else you may want to say. You've already said enough."

His hands closed on her waist, and he pulled her forcibly from her mount.

"I haven't even started yet," he told her. "You need a little taming." And, without putting her down, holding her so that she was helpless, he kissed her. The kiss was deliberately hard-mouthed and roughly possessive. It was also starkly, primitively, insistent.

She twisted and fought to end it. Somehow, she managed to drive her clenched fist into his jaw. His mouth left hers and he laughed.

"You'll get over that. You're my girl, Albora. *Mine.*"

She struck at him again and his arms tightened until she felt crushed. "Stop!" she gasped. "Stop, Hank!"

Then something drove between them and tore Hank Ferrier away from her. There was the dull, ugly sound of a fist smashing into flesh. Hank stumbled and fell to his knees.

Standing over him was Ty Patterson. A Ty whose face was dark with something deadlier than fury and whose eyes were black as those of a great eagle plummeting toward the earth.

Hank, still on his knees, moved as if to get to his feet, but instead reached for his gun.

"Drop it!" Patterson's revolver was already leveled. "Don't make me waste lead on you."

Hank's weapon fell from his hand, and Patterson, scooping it from the ground, thrust it through his belt. "Now get up."

"Whatever you say." Ferrier drawled the words. "It was easy and safe to sneak up from behind. Anybody could get the drop that way."

"Fork your bronc and ride!" Patterson snapped.

"When I'm ready. You must have been crawling through the brush after Albora. Do you follow her around all the time?"

"Maybe. I'm giving you just two seconds to—" Patterson broke off and shot a worried glance down the trail.

"What do you know about that?" Hank laughed. "More company."

Fast hoofs were coming down trail. And following them was another sound. The faint, but unmistakabe creak of wheels.

Ty Patterson's fingers tightened on his gun. "Stay right where you are," he told the other man. "If you're smart you'll keep your mouth shut, too."

A buckboard swung around the long curve. A glossy buckboard drawn by a pair of sleek, matched grays. Anthony Benedict.

"Hank," Benedict shouted. "Didn't you get any farther than this? I left a note saying I'd decided not to wait." His words cut off, and he hauled violently on the reins, bringing the carriage to a jolting halt.

"What's going on?" His glance, hurrying from Ferrier to Ty Patterson, turned into a stare. "Well, drop my anchor!" he finally rumbled. "Ty Patterson."

WRAPPING the reins around the whipstock, he stepped to the ground and strode slowly toward Ty, chuckling throatily. "So *this* is where the owner of the *Lady Jane* is hiding out while every insurance detective in the country hunts for him!"

"Climb back into your fancy wagon, Benedict."

"You're clever, boy, clever." Benedict's chuckle grew louder. "An army of detectives and lawmen are falling over each other to find you and here you are—right in front of their eyes. Don't blame you, though, for not wanting to answer questions about your new steamboat that's almost ready to be launched. *Flying Star's* her name, isn't it? Sure is puzzling where you got the money to build her when, as everybody knows, you've gone broke. Still, you've collected plenty of insurance every time river pirates boarded the *Lady Jane,* haven't you?"

Ty Patterson's face looked suddenly gaunt. His glance moved past Benedict and reached for Albora. And she looked into eyes of unlighted blue ice. Eyes which could never have held warmth or sparked with fire.

He was the owner of the unlucky—or perhaps, for him, quite lucky—*Lady Jane.* A hunted criminal. She had thought him proudly free, believed he possessed a special kind of strength. . .

But he, too, was liar and a cheat. Worse than the outlaws who, on his orders, had raided his heavily insured ship.

If she could only stop looking at him, stop seeing him. But there was no easing, concealing mist over her senses now. No escape. Instead, she was sharply, starkly aware of everything about him; conscious of the fairness of his hair, the frost-blue of his eyes, the blunt chin and even of the way he stood with his feet planted against the earth.

Anger blazed darkly through her, searing and destroying. A consuming, bitter fire.

"That's enough, Benedict." Ty's voice was scraping metal. "You're unarmed and I can't order you to draw. I can't beat you senseless, either, because you're too old. Better get into your rig before I dump you into it."

Benedict chuckled again as he returned to the buckboard. Gathering up the reins, he called, "Good-by, Patterson. As soon as you're in the penetentiary, I may buy in your new *Flying Star.* The insurance company'll probably sell her cheap." He cracked the whip with a flourish. "So long, Hank."

Hank Ferrier grinned as the buckboard raced down trail. He said, "Time for us to leave, too, Albora. Maybe you've changed your mind now and won't object if I take you home."

"I haven't changed my mind," she said quietly. "I never will."

A dark flush struck upward along Hank's jaws. Swiftly, he swung up on his horse and rode off at a hard gallop.

There was an awkward silence. Then, avoiding Ty Patterson's eyes, she stepped into the saddle and wheeled across the road.

"Albora." Patterson's voice was low but it was still crisp, almost commanding.

She pulled in and looked, silently, back at him. His blue glance touched her eyes, pressed seekingly against them.

"It's all right," he said finally. "I didn't expect anything else. Good-by and a safe journey home."

CHAPTER FIVE

The Last Raid

ALBORA had to go back to the wood station. She did not leave it again until well after sunset, and it was dusk when she reached the Twisted T.

Her mother was waiting at the door, looking worried.

"I'm glad *you* finally decided to come home" she said. "Your father isn't here, either, and it's supper time."

"Sorry I'm so late. I'll be ready as soon as I clean up.

But it was almost an hour later when Albora and her mother sat down, alone, to the supper table.

"This isn't like your father," Mrs. Cleveland said, frowning. "Being on time is part of his New England code."

"Well, he's entitled to an exception or two," the girl said.

The meal finished, they went into the parlor and settled down to an evening of reading, but at ten o'clock Luisa Cleveland let her magazine fall to the floor.

"When Dave left I thought he'd be back right away—in half an hour or so."

"Then he came home and left again?" Albora asked in surprise.

Her mother nodded. "He was on his way to the barn when Hank Ferrier arrived. They talked a few minutes, and a little later I saw them riding out of the yard together. Dave didn't stop to tell me where he was going, so I took it for granted he wouldn't be away very long."

"*Hank* came for him? And they left together?"

"Yes. Dave should've come to the house and explained but he didn't. Husbands have a way of doing that, now and then—to show their independence, I suppose."

The girl's brows moved together in a worried frown. Hank hadn't been on the Twisted T since Ty Patterson had interrupted the violent kiss with which Hank had intended to tame her. Patterson must have been following her, or he couldn't have appeared at the exact moment she needed help. Had Ty, as Hank had charged, been following her constantly and even coming secretly to the ranch without making an attempt to see her? Strange behavior for a man who hired outlaws to plunder his own ship. Where was he now? Still running before the law?

But, suddenly, Hank Ferrier was even more puzzling and disturbing. What could he have wanted of her father? What could have happened to prevent Dave Cleveland from sending word to his home?

At midnight, Albora got abruptly out of her chair and said, "I'm going to the Double F and find out about Dad."

"Not yet, child. If he's merely being willful, going after him will make him furious. Besides, what are we worrying about? Your father's able to take care of himself. Let's go to bed."

"Still—" The girl caught back her words and said instead, "You're probably right, and it *is* past our bedtime. Good night, Mother."

But alone in her room, her growing uneasiness became definite, undeniable fear. Something was wrong. And Hank Ferrier was responsible. Her father's prolonged absence was not an accident. The thought was unreasonable, almost absurd, but it grew into fearful conviction. She had seen Hank turn into a primitive savage. Maybe there were even darker qualities in him. . . .

She stopped the thought determinedly, forced it away from her, and considered what she had to do. She couldn't start for the Double F until her mother was asleep. Until then, she must wait. Pulling off her boots, she turned the lamp-flame down to the faintest glow and settled into a chair.

Glancing at the clock again, she saw that less than five minutes had passed. She stretched out, let her head rest against the back of the chair and closed her eyes.

She started violently awake and stumbled to her feet. There was something she must remember, something important. . . . Her brain cleared and she whirled to the clock. It was after four!

Jerking open her dresser drawer, she took out the holstered gun and belt. Fastening the belt around her waist, she picked up her boots and hurried through the hall to

her parents' room. The door was slightly ajar, and she pushed it open and stepped over the threshold. Her mother was asleep but her father still had not returned.

She slid back into the hall and padded swiftly to the front door. Letting herself out, she closed the door noiselessly.

TEN minutes later, she rode out of the yard, turned up the wagon road and wheeled onto the range. Within an hour she reached Half Way Forks and pulled her lathered pony down to an easy canter. The Double F was only minutes away now.

But as she swung west, an echo began to beat uptrail. The echo of steel-shod hoofs. She reined in and listened. More than one set of hoofs. And there was another, slighter sound. The faint creaking of wheels. Riding off the trail again, she headed her pony into the brush.

The pounding hoofs drove toward her, and then she saw the dark shape of a buckboard flash through the gloom to the forks, where it slowed before moving west in the direction of the Double F.

Albora rode out of the brush and followed. The echo of hoofs and sound of wheels stopped, but she continued on to the Double F. Pulling in near the gates, she got down and walked slowly, groping through the pre-dawn darkness, into the yard. An oblong of light halted her.

The ranch house door was open, and the escaping light spilled over a smart, glossy carriage. Anthony Benedict's rig.

Albora was startled. Did the shipping magnate make a habit of dropping in on old friends at five o'clock in the morning?

The door closed, cutting off the light, and Albora stared uncertainly at the shaded, faintly glowing windows. Why shouldn't she simply go to the door, knock, and ask for her father? She was being too imaginative and melodramatic. There was no reason for Hank to harm her father. And it was possible that Dave Cleveland hadn't come to the ranch at all, but parted from Ferrier to travel in an entirely different direction.

But she moved slowly back to the gates, walking carefully over the shadowy ground. Getting into the saddle, she rode downtrail to the home range and across it to the Double F lane. Half way through the lane, she dismounted, ground-tied her pony and felt her way into the yard.

Light still glowed from behind the drawn window shades, and when she reached the house wall, she heard low voices talking in the parlor. Only two voices—Hank's and Anthony Benedict's. She moved forward, straining to understand their words. And abruptly, Hank's voice lifted to sharp clarity.

"Here we go," he said. "Watch your step." He was at the door, opening it. . . .

The oblong of light cut into the darkness but was blotted out again as two men emerged, one walking behind the other. The first man was her father. The second, Hank Ferrier. And Hank was prodding a gun in her father's back.

"The ponies are in the barn, saddled and waiting," he told Dave Cleveland. If you follow orders I won't have to kill you. Understand?"

Cleveland nodded and started forward again. He was Ferrier's prisoner!

Albora pulled her gun from its holster, but they had stepped out of the patch of light and disappeared into the darkness. She inched along the side of the house and heard them enter the barn. When they came out . . .

Her hand tightening convulsively on the gun-butt, she struggled to see, her eyes straining as if to force the darkness apart. Hoofs clattered from the barn. They had mounted inside and, in another minute, would ride past her.

They were directly in front of her, at last. But they were merely black shapes in the gloom and she could not know which was Hank Ferrier, which her father.

The oblong of light flickered off again

and she saw Anthony Benedict in the doorway. "Good luck, Hank," he called. "I'll be waiting."

The door slammed shut, and the hoofs of the two ponies chunked out of the yard onto the trail.

ALBORA, running at reckless speed through the darkness, scrambled onto her pony and sent him plunging across the range to the trail where the receding tatoo of hoofs told her that Hank was taking her father south. She prodded her mount until he stretched out in a hard gallop.

If she could travel fast enough, she might circle the trail and cut back across it to take Hank Ferrier by surprise. Turning off through the brush into the low, flat hills, she drove her pony even harder, and finally knew she was moving up on the horses pounding along the trail. She was past them, yards ahead, when she reached a break in the mound-like hills. She turned through it toward the trail, only to jerk to a halt.

Hank and her father had also turned off and were riding down-slope to the river. And waiting for them were more than a dozen masked men. Outlaws! Pirates!

Her glance flicked to the river and discovered a boat tied up directly below. A new-looking boat showing the gilt-lettered words: *Flying Star.*

The *Flying Star.* Ty Patterson's new steamship. The ship he had built with stolen money! Now it, too, was to be held up and stripped, probably at his orders.

The outlaws were shifting their ponies, getting ready to strike. Automatically, instinctivey, Albora reached for her gun. And then a hand jerked it from her grip.

A masked man was beside her. He had walked noiselessly up to her motionless pony.

"Ride down and join the boys," he told her. "Remember, a girl can get shot just as dead as anybody else. Get going."

She sent her mount down the slope. The possibility of lookouts hadn't occurred to her. Hank's gang was thorough.

The waiting outlaws wheeled, weapons flashing out, and her captor called, "We've got company—nice company."

Her father was stiffly erect in the saddle, his face grim and colorless. He met her glance and nodded but did not speak.

"Over here, Albora." Ferrier pulled the neckerchief from his face. "I figured you'd start looking for Papa—you're a real high-handed girl."

"What are you doing to him?"

"Doing?" He laughed, his mouth twisting. "Nothing. He's just going to play pirate. And you're going to watch him do it." Without pausing, he turned and called, "Kelsey, you take care of Cleveland. Be sure he gets right into the middle of the party—and pull up his neckerchief so everything'll look right. I'll take care of the girl. This is it."

The outlaws nudged their ponies through the brush, roweled them across the muddy bank and charged the steamboat. And with them, under the gun of the man called Kelsey, was Dave Cleveland.

"Now, Albora," Hank said, "we'll get close enough so you can watch Papa, but not too close. I don't want anything to happen to you." Tying his neckerchief over the lower part of his face, he caught her pony's reins, and leading him, rode onto the muddy bank.

"We'll get down here," he told her. "Do you see Papa going up the boat's side with Kelsey?" Some of the outlaws, guns roaring, were boarding the *Flying Star,* while others stood guard below.

Albora got out of the saddle and Hank stepped down beside her. "Enjoying the show?" he asked.

"Why are you doing this? What are you gaining?"

"Your silence. Tony Benedict and I figure we have to do something since you've become Ty Patterson's girl—or think you have. You might talk. Might even tell the

law I was one of the hombres who raided the *Lady Jane*. But you can't turn in your own father. And he's one of us, now."

"Anthony Benedict," Albora murmured. "He's the one behind your gang! The outlaw boss. He arranged the raids on the *Lady Jane*, to ruin Ty Patterson—to drive him out of competition with his company! Is that how he holds his shipping monopoly?"

"He knows how to handle his business, all right."

The girl's glance returned, unwillingly, to the *Flying Star*. Gangplanks had been lowered, and the passengers were lined up on deck to be stripped of their valuables. And a little ahead of one of the outlaws was her father. A little ahead, so that the other's gun could be trained on his back.

ALBORA stirred angrily, and her high-heeled boots slipped on the mud. She caught herself, but immediately moved again, sharply and swiftly, sliding so violently that she sprawled full length in the mud.

Hank Ferrier knelt to lift her. "I should've warned you this mud's dangerous. You hurt?"

"I don't know." She dropped against him as if near collapse, and her searching fingers found the butt of his gun. Jerking it from the holster, she sprang to her feet.

"Call to your men," she told him. "Order one of them—just one—to bring my father here."

"You crazy kid! I thought you were smarter than that." His hand flashed to his pocket and she saw the outline of a second gun. She squeezed down on the hammer of her own weapon and the air in front of her exploded. Hank stiffened, reeled forward and fell.

No chance, now, of freeing her father. Some of the outlaws on guard near the steamboat were wheeling their ponies

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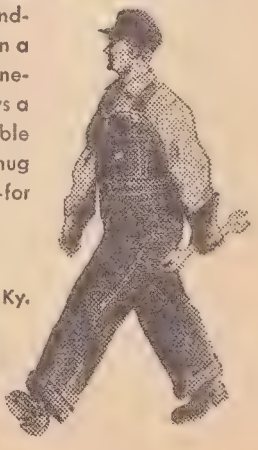

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around and staring. Whirling, Albora scrambled into the saddle. More horsemen were charging toward her, their mounts plunging from the trail onto the banks. Part of the outlaw gang, probably, arriving to help finish the job. But no! These men were not masked. And they were beginning to fire on the pirates.

As they pounded past her, she glimpsed the fact of the man at their head. Saw the high-bridged, aquiline nose, the blunt chin, the fair hair. Ty Patterson!

His glance touched her and he checked his pony. "Albora!"

He was wheeling back to her, but she prodded her mount on to the trail. Anthony Benedict was waiting at the Double F. Anthony Benedict, the real head of the outlaw gang, who had forced her father into the role of pirate. Albora knew she had to get to him.

Her hands tightened on the reins. Someone, a few yards ahead, had stepped out onto the trail and was waving her down, signaling frantically. She slowed her mount, and as the man ran toward her, she saw it was Anthony Benedict with a leveled gun appeared in his hand. She had no choice but to bring her horse to a halt in front of him.

"Now, my dear," Benedict said, "I'll take care of that." He lifted her revolver from the holster and ordered her to get down.

She dismounted and he nodded. "That's it. Leave your horse where it is and walk ahead of me."

The girl's lips broke apart angrily. "You didn't stay at the Double F. You followed to watch your men rob the steamboat, didn't you?"

"Of course. I wanted to know, to be sure. Keep ahead of me and start—"

A gun barking from the trail cut off his words. His vulpine eyes widened, and he sank to his knees and rolled over onto his face.

Albora stared unbelievingly down at him. The gun shot had come from behind her. Someone on the trail had brought him down. Her glance lifted slowly, almost fearfully, and encountered Ty Patterson in front of her.

He did not speak. Merely kept on walking silently toward her. Then, when he reached her, his arms opened and gathered her to him.

She was trembling, shaken, frozen with shock. "He—Benedict was waiting beside the trail. He—he stopped me—"

"He figured he had to kill you to protect himself."

"If you hadn't followed me—"

"Darling," he said, "there'll never be a time when I won't follow you."

"I—I shot Hank Ferrier. Maybe I killed him. He was one of the gang. He—he forced my father to go with him. I had to shoot him."

"I know. But Ferrier's not dead. Not even badly wounded. He and the rest of the gang will be taken to the jail in St. Charles. They turned yellow at the end. When those detectives started throwing lead, the raiders knew they were facing a real battle, and they quit—fast. They couldn't hold out in the end."

"Detectives?"

"Insurance detectives. We've been planning this for a long time. The detectives have been drifting in, one or two every few days. When we were ready, the *Flying Star* was started on her maiden voyage. I knew Benedict would have her raided. But —" his arms tightened—"talking can wait. We'll have a lifetime to do it in, darling. Albora . . ."

Her face tilted, and as he kissed her his mouth brought a new, fierce pulse to life in her lips. The frost-blue of his eyes caught fire, and beyond the fire was something more. The impossible dream that could never be realized, yet could never be lost. Never realized? It could be. It *would* be. Her lips stirred and gave back the flame of his.

ONE-MAN GAL

By Kenneth Fowler

"Oh, Pete, Pete!" she breathed. . . .

Sheba didn't know what misery was—till her cowboy inherited a partner who was beautiful, flirtatious and all female!

JUDITH laughed. "So this is the ivory tower where you come to be alone with your sad, romantic thoughts!"

The jeering sarcasm in her sister's voice stabbed like a knife-thrust through Sheba Payne's day-dreaming. This spot, in the shadowed coolness of a motte of ancient cottonwoods with the brook babbling softly nearby, was her favorite retreat, and she came here often when she felt a need to be by herself. She swung around with a guilty start, glaring up at her sister.

Judith sat her steeldust with a cowpuncher's slack-hipped gracefulness, her jodhpured legs supported loosely in the stirrups, her granite-cool eyes fastened disdainfully on the book opened on her sister's lap.

"Why anyone wants to stuff their heads with that trash," she sneered, "is more than I can understand!"

A glint of anger showed in Sheba's haze-blue eyes. "Thomas Moore," she said, "did not write trash."

"Mush! Sentimental mush!" scoffed Judith. She swung down lithely from the steeldust and walked over to Sheba. Then, before Sheba could guess her intention, she reached out abruptly and snatched the book from her.

Sheba paled. "Jude, you give that back!"

"Listen to this!" Judith had been leafing rapidly through the book. In a mocking, sing-song voice, she began reading aloud:

"When true hearts lie wither'd,
And fond ones are flown,
Oh, who would inhabit
This bleak world alone?"

Closing the book with a snap, she flung it back in her sister's lap.

"I'll bet you were thinking of Pete Hunt when you read that!"

"If I was, it's no business of yours."

"Filling your head with all that drivel!" Judith stared down at her contemptuously, adding: "Incidentally, he's returned, I hear. But instead of coming home with his new partner, this Bobby Young, there's talk in town he's brought back a woman with him."

Sheba stiffened. "I don't suppose it ever occurred to you," she countered tightly, "that he might be needing a housekeeper at Long Bell, now that Mrs. Burdick's left."

"Poppycock!" Judith sneered. "If he's brought back a housekeeper, you can bet it's some cute little trick who doesn't know a pothook from a hair curler!"

Sheba held her temper. "I wish we didn't have to quarrel like this, Jude. We wouldn't, if you didn't feel so bitter about —Pete."

"Me—bitter?" Judith laughed shrilly. "Don't make me laugh! And don't make yourself cry. Forget him, Sheba—before it's too late.

Sheba stiffened. "I'm not a baby any more, Jude. I was nineteen last week, remember? Just because you're three years older doesn't make you my guardian."

Abruptly, Judith turned and swung up to the steeldust. "Maybe not," she said. "But if you've still got the daunsy over a cheap woman-chaser like Pete Hunt, you're going to need one!" She sat glowering down at her sister. "I noticed another interesting line in that book," she added. "'The moon looks on many brooks, the brook can see no moon but this.'"

"Drivel!" Sheba quoted back nastily.

"All right, Sheba. But you're going to get burned. I'm warning you."

"You should know, Jude."

The barb struck. With a cranky jerk on the reins, Judith swung the steeldust. Then, before Sheba could react to a secondary impulse of remorse, her sister was spurring recklessly, pushing her horse into a headlong gallop, back toward High Cross.

Staring after her, Sheba felt her anger dissolve into ruefulness, then into a feeling of tenderness and pity. She had always felt a deep sisterly affection for Jude, as, she suspected, Jude had for her. And two years ago, when their mother had died, leaving them both alone in the world, the bond between them had, for a time, become tighter than ever. Judith had stepped automatically into their mother's place as head of the household. Then Pete Hunt had come into the picture.

Sheba sighed. She was certain Jude was all mixed up, as far as Pete was concerned. Jealousy and hurt pride had warped her naturally sympathetic nature and had erected this barrier of contention between them, destroying a close, sisterly relation that had heretofore been perfect.

Abstractedly, Sheba stared down to where the brook rippled and splashed, mirroring alternate patterns of sunlight and shadow from the low-hanging branches of the cottonwoods. *The moon looks on many brooks, the brook can see no moon but this.* . . . It was plain how Jude had interpreted those lines. She had meant that Pete Hunt was no one-woman man, while Sheba was the brook that could see only one moon, and wanted only one. For her, there was just one man in the moon, and he was Pete Hunt. . . .

ABRUPTLY, she swung around, tucking the compact little volume of Moore's poems into her jodhpur pocket. Why not ride over to Long Bell right now, and see Pete? And prove to her own satisfaction and Jude's, once and for all, that Pete was not the pleasure-loving idler that Jude wanted to make him appear?

It was true, Sheba admitted grudgingly to herself, that Pete had been away a long time, and had not written her during this period. But there could be plenty of reasons for that. Pete had a lot to do. And the responsibility for running Long Bell had been shunted wholly upon him when old Tom Bell had died.

As she mounted her sorrel and splashed it across the brook, it occurred to Sheba that perhaps it was a little odd about Pete fetching back a housekeeper all the way from Oklahoma City. It also seemed strange that he hadn't brought Bobby Young back with him. Although Tom Bell had had relatives in Texas, his will had left them nothing. His entire estate, including Long Bell, had gone to Pete Hunt, his foreman, and to this kinsman of a former partner of his, named Young. Accordingly, a month ago Pete had packed his war bag and left for Oklahoma City to find Bobby Young.

Sheba's thoughts darkened as she rode along. But twenty minutes later, as she crossed the old plank bridge over Rebosa Creek and came in sight of Long Bell, a feeling of expectancy washed away all her doubts and misgivings. The long adobe ranch house stood in a small clearing beyond the creek, shaded by a single dusty cottonwood that arched like a tremendous umbrella above its low-pitched roof. Farther back, in a peeled-pole corral, a few horses stood hip-shot, idly cropping grass. The ranch yard had a somnolent, almost deserted air in the mid-morning quiet.

Sheba rode up to the trellised doorway and dismounted. Her rattling of the wrought-iron door knocker brought no response. She tried again, and waited for a full minute. When she could still detect no sound from within the house, she turned, disappointedly, and picked up the reins of the sorrel. At this moment the door opened unexpectedly and a cool, throaty voice came from behind her.

"Yes?"

Sheba pivoted around, staring with an expression of blank surprise at the girl standing in the doorway.

A red silk peignoir, fitted tightly at the bodice, candidly outlined the girl's curves. In one hand she held a hair brush, and with this she was casually stroking her sleek, blue-black hair, which fell with an icy gleam across her bare left shoulder. Sultry, deep-brown eyes regarded Sheba with an expression of lazy inquiry.

"I— I was looking for Pete Hunt," Sheba blurted. "You're the new—housekeeper?"

The girl's laugh trilled huskily from deep in her throat. "Housekeeper? Hardly that, darling—yet." Her eyes ran over Sheba in a deliberately appraising look. "I'm Roberta Young," she added idly. "And by the grace of being Tom Bell's goddaughter, I seem to own half a ranch. Isn't it amazing? And I probably never saw the old coot more than once in my life!"

It came to Sheba suddenly that she was standing there in front of the door like a

sun-struck dogie, not uttering a word. She wrenched up her voice from the dry well of her throat.

"Why—why yes," she managed at last. "I suppose it is wonderful. Almost like—like manna from heaven."

Roberta Young rolled her eyes. "Manna," she said, "and a man thrown in for good measure!" She brought the hair brush down across her shoulder in a last caressing stroke. "Come on out back," she invited. "Pete's out at the pump. I'm giving him a shampoo."

Feeling like a puppet jerked by its master wire, Sheba found herself dazedly trailing Roberta Young through the long-closed, musty-smelling house. Bobby Young, a woman. . . . Then Roberta had the kitchen door open, and a sudden sinking sensation swept Sheba back as she heard Pete's voice.

"Hey, what's the big idea?" she heard him bawl. "You get a man hog-tied and all lathered up to Sunday and then—"

He was squatting on a low stool, under the pump, as Sheba walked out into the yard. Then he looked past Bobby Young and saw her.

"Sheba!"

STARING at his sandy head foamed with suds, Sheba felt her stomach shrivel into a knot.

"Give the poor helpless man a helping hand, will you, honey," Bobby Young's voice drawled from behind her, "while I go back inside and change? If I don't quit wriggling around in this kimono, he might get dangerous!"

"No, really!" Sheba protested. "I—I have to go. I—"

It was too late. The back door slammed. A cold, boring emptiness yawned at the pit of Sheba's stomach as her glance swung back reluctantly to Pete Hunt. Stripped to the waist, he sat peeping out at her through the folds of the towel with which he was vigorously massaging his soapy hair.

"Whoosh! I think I'll feel better with these blasted cinders out of my hair." He grinned up at her sheepishly. "Don't guess I'm exactly dressed to receive visitors," he went on. "Bobby—" He stopped suddenly, staring at Sheba's tight-set face.

With difficulty, Sheba found her voice. "With Bobby," she said acidly, "it didn't seem to make a particle of difference!"

She saw shock reach into his sun-squinted eyes. Then abruptly, he was up from the stool, absently swiping at a speck of lather that had fallen across his cheek.

"Look, Sheba! If you think I knew in advance that Bobby Young was a—"

"It doesn't interest me," Sheba cut him off fiercely, "what you thought in advance!"

"Now wait a minute, Sheba! I've moved all my gear into the bunk house. Bobby—Miss Young—is going to live in the house till—well, till we can decide on some kind of a split-up over the property. You can't expect me to—"

"I can expect you not to come out here and let her give you a shampoo when—when you're like that!" She stared at his bronzed, glistening torso. "But I'm sure you found it a very cosy arrangement," she added flatly.

"Oh, darn it, Sheba!" He reached out angrily, almost roughly, and pulled her into his arms. "Words don't make any sense sometimes," he blurted, "but maybe this will."

For a giddy moment, then, as his mouth lay crushed against hers, she felt herself uprooted, torn wildly, intoxicatingly, from her bitterness and anger. His rumpled hair had a clean soapy scent, his flat hard chest was a shield against which she clutched desperately at the vanished dream, the bright bubble of all the remembered yesterdays between them.

Gone . . . gone . . . and with them all the shining, hoped-for tomorrows. Abruptly, she wrenched away from him.

"Let me go!" she panted.

"Sheba, if you'll just listen to me! There's no need for you to—"

She didn't let him finish. Her right hand flashed and struck, leaving an angry red welt across his cheek. Then, as his hold on her relaxed momentarily, she spun away from him and kited for the front of the house.

She didn't look back until she was up on the sorrel and had it headed out of the yard. Then she saw Pete, and realized that he hadn't moved. He was gently stroking his cheek, staring after her with a somber expression of bafflement.

She drank her bitter dregs of satisfaction from that, but the pleasure derived from malice is short-lived, and by the time she had reached the bridge and had her horse headed back toward High Cross, an angry sensation of depression settled over her. Had she let the remembrance of Jude's warning carry her away, back there? After all, she had seen no real evidence of anything between Pete and this woman who, by a mere act of fate, had become part owner of Long Bell with him. Maybe Jude's suspicions were catching.

As she rode along, holding the sorrel to an easy lope, Sheba's thoughts hunted back, remembering the way it had begun. Pete Hunt riding over to High Cross one day, to borrow a post-hole digger. And after that, starting to drop in a couple nights a week, regularly. Jude had assumed he had been coming to see her. But he hadn't. And when Jude had belatedly discovered the truth—had become aware that Sheba was the object of his interest—her vanity had been cut to the quick.

Sheba had felt sorry for her, had done the best she knew how to convince Jude that she had not deliberately set her cap for their visitor. It was no use. Jude had had no wish to be convinced on a point so sorely touching her pride, and it was from that moment that they had rapidly drifted apart.

Now, her mind distracted by these thoughts, Sheba had no awareness of the slogging sound of hoofbeats ahead of her until she glanced up and saw the figure of a rider approaching her around a bend of the trail. To her surprise, the man drew rein as he came abreast of her and lifted his hat.

"Excuse me, ma'am, but maybe you could tell me if I'm cuttin' the right sign for Long Bell."

Faintly startled, Sheba studied him. The man was tall and shad-lean, with an angular face and gun-flint gray eyes shadowed under a mop of shaggy black hair.

"You must be a stranger in these parts," she said.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Well, you're on the right trail. Keep on as you are for about two miles, till you come to a bridge. Cross that, and you'll be at Long Bell."

"I'm purely obliged to you, ma'am."

Sheba gave him a thoughtful after look as he went on, then shrugged and gigged her sorrel. Whoever the man was, and whatever he might want at Long Bell, was no longer any concern of hers. A lawyer, or possibly a cattle-buyer. Or—Sheba thought suddenly—an old flame of Bobby Young's perhaps?

The thought lighted a faint spark of hope in her, which quickly died. What did she care now? Jude had been right—Pete Hunt was a woman-chaser. And for Pete Hunt's kind, the greenest grass would always grow in the next pasture. There would be some other bright new face, once Bobby Young began to pall on him. . . .

THE dance celebrating completion of Coronado's new town hall was in full stride when Sheba and Judith arrived with their escorts. Judith had come with Johnny Halvern, who ramrodded the big Cross T to the west of Long Bell. And at Judith's insistent suggestion, Johnny had brought along the ever-available "friend" for Sheba, a lanky, shy-mannered puncher

with a nice face, named Duke Lantry.

Now, as they entered the big bunting-draped hall, a din of gaiety and confusion burst upon them. Two fiddlers mounted on a platform were doing their industrious best to drown out the stentorian chant of the caller. Sheba merely nodded as Duke Lantry suggested, "Try a whirl?" and then had a feeling of being sucked into a whirlpool of stomping feet and spinning bodies.

She was wearing, ironically, the new party dress she had been saving to celebrate Pete Hunt's homecoming—a bottle-green satin that clung precariously to the tips of her slim white shoulders and accented the dark loveliness of her reddish-bronze hair and soft, haze-blue eyes. But she took no satisfaction from it tonight, nor from the proud and flattering way that Duke Lantry kept looking down at her as they danced. Duke wasn't Pete. Duke could not, would not, ever take the place of Pete. Because love was not like a bank account. Not real love. Real love could be deposited, but it could never be withdrawn. . . .

Oh, Pete, Pete! The cry was wrung from her heart, from the dark void of emptiness and loneliness within her. For two weeks—ever since that day at Long Bell when she had discovered Pete out at the pump with Bobby Young—she had had no relief from its inexorably spreading pain. Day dreams, the desperate fantasies of hope, had filled her waking hours. But he had not come to High Cross. Nor had he written. And each day she had become more listless and miserable. Until, tonight, Jude had gone to her closet and taken down the green dress and flung it at her angrily. "Now *I'm* getting fed up!" Jude had exploded. "You get into that dress and no more nonsense. You're going to that stomp tonight if I have to hog-tie you and carry you there!"

And so she had come, hoping it would help her forget, hoping it would be the first difficult stepping stone to a final forgetting. But the gaiety and confusion all around her seemed only to intensify her melancholy, and make her moodily resentful of the good time everyone else was having.

She was suddenly aware of the caller, chanting:

> *Wave the ocean, wave the sea,*
> *Wave that pretty girl back to me.*

And at that instant, over the bobbing heads of the dancers, she saw Pete Hunt, dancing with Bobby Young. She felt her heart stop. Pete had seen her. And then he provided the final insufferable insult. He grinned at her—and waved!

Anger flared in her, then subsided into a tight knot at the pit of her stomach as she stiffly ignored the greeting. The gall of him! Blandly waving to her, while he pranced and do-ce-doed with that little hussy he'd picked up down in Oklahoma!

They were swinging in her direction now, and she caught a fuller look at them, hugged in each other's arms. Bobby Young's dress was a sheath of bright yellow silk, boldly accenting every firm, rounded curve of her body. The diaphanous skirt swirled about her trim ankles like lemon foam.

Dimly, Sheba became aware again of the caller's chant:

> *There comes a girl I used to know,*
> *Swing 'er once, and let 'er go.*

Used to know . . . let 'er go. The words, like the lines of some foolish childish doggerel, began repeating themselves in her head. There was a silly frozen grin on Duke Lantry's face as he hopped forward to swing her, and her answering smile was so stiff she had a feeling her own face must look like a mask.

Somehow, finally, the number ended, and through the press of the crowd she caught a glimpse of Pete Hunt, elbowing his way toward her.

"Excuse me," she told Duke Lantry, with a flustered glance across her shoulder.

"I—I think I need to spruce up a bit. I'll be back in just a minute."

"Wouldn't say you needed any sprucing up, Miss Payne," Duke Lantry said with clumsy gallantry. "But take your time. I'll go have a smoke."

Sheba shot another look across her shoulder. Pete had stopped. Bobby Young had come up behind him and was tugging urgently at his sleeve and nodding behind her. Relief mingled with a bitter pang of jealousy in Sheba as she saw Pete swing around, sliding his arm through Bobby Young's. Then, together, they were making their way back through the crowd, away from her.

Sheba whirled and headed blindly for the woman's coat room. At the door, she almost bumped into Jude coming out.

"So here you are!" Jude said. "I've been looking for you all over." She stopped suddenly, noticing Sheba's agitated manner. "What's the matter? Don't tell me you've heard the big news, too?"

"News?" Sheba stared at her blankly. "What news?"

"Long Bell," Jude answered shortly, and pushed open the door to the coat room. "Let's go in here, where it's quiet."

Sheba followed her inside, to a secluded corner. Then Jude sprang her surprise. "I just heard about this tonight," she said. "Pete Hunt's been trying to sell his half interest in Long Bell. And can't."

SHEBA gasped. Hope that Pete might yet come to his senses had never quite died in her, she realized now. A sharpening excitement gripped her suddenly. "But why?" she said. "If Pete wants to sell, why can't he—"

Jude interrupted, "I wouldn't get my hopes up, if I were you. It's not on your account that Pete wants to get out from under over there."

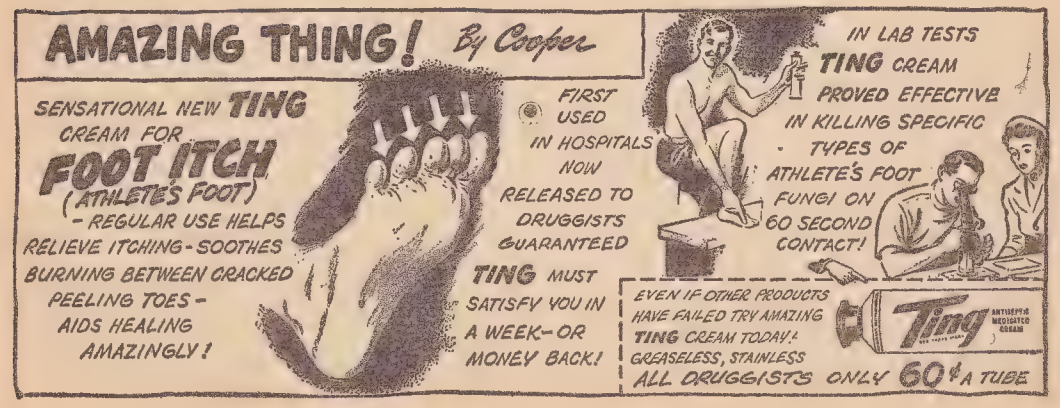
"Jude, I wish you'd stop beating around the bush. If you've got something to tell me, for heaven's sake tell it!"

Jude looked at her bitterly. "You see? I just have to mention his name and you get in a tizzy."

"I'm not in a tizzy! You brought this up; I didn't."

"All right." Jude shrugged. "Pete can't sell his part of Long Bell because he's up to his ears in trouble over there, and nobody wants to buy into a jinx outfit. Ever since Bobby Young hired this Ad Corey—the man you met on the trail that day—peculiar things have been happening at Long Bell. Pete has lost a lot of cows, and right after Pete put his 'for sale' notice in the paper, somebody tried to set fire to his hay barn. He was up in the east forty, mending fence, when he noticed the smoke. And when he high-tailed it down to see what the trouble was, he was shot at."

Sheba paled. "Pete! Shot at? But why —who—?"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"That's the mystery," Jude answered, with evident relish. "Nobody knows. But one thing I do know. When I was in town yesterday I met Ma Henson from Two-Six, and she told me that when she was riding in she surprised Bobby Young and this Ad Corey in a big hug-and-kiss act, up near Moonstone Falls." Then, seeing Sheba's face light up, she added flatly, "And don't look so pleased about that, either. Miss Fancy's just playing one off against the other—and may the best man lose!"

For a long moment, after Jude had gone out to rejoin Johnny Halvern, Sheba stood tense and undecided in the doorway, looking over the festively decorated ballroom. Eddie Parks and old Sam Doerffler, the fiddlers, were tuning up for the next number, and couples were drifting toward the dance floor. Off in a corner Sheba saw Duke Lantry craning his head over the crowd, evidently looking for her. Pete Hunt and Bobby Young were nowhere in sight. Sheba suddenly felt the need for a breath of fresh air. She skirted quickly around the outer fringe of the crowd and reached the front door.

Outside, the cool night air was scented faintly with oleander, and a full moon shone down from a bright, star-frosted sky.

Zigzagging her way through the maze of vehicles that jammed the wide side yard of the building, Sheba reached the buckboard in which Duke Lantry had driven her in to the dance. Feeling suddenly tired, she climbed in and leaned her head against the seat back. Almost at the same instant she heard the voices from somewhere off to her left—first Pete's, then Bobby Young's.

"I don't savvy it," she heard Pete grumble in a puzzled tone. "If Ad's got a line on those rustlers, why didn't he ride in himself and tell me about it? Wasn't any call to send Scotty down, that I can see."

"Well, don't expect me to know everything!" Bobby Young's low, throaty voice sounded faintly petulant in the darkness. "All I know is what Scotty said—that Ad would wait for you up at the line shack, on Bald Hill."

Sheba tensed, hearing Pete's voice again. "Well, okay. I'll start in a few minutes then. There's a little private business I've got to attend to inside, first."

A silky rustling sound came out of the shadows, and a moment later Sheba saw two dimly outlined figures moving out from a clutter of wagons, heading back toward the patch of light in front of the town hall.

Despite Jude's stubborn skepticism, Sheba again felt a stab of hope. Pete hadn't written her, it was true. But at least, tonight, he had tried to see her, talk to her. And unless this was pure wishful thinking on her part, Pete was going back in there now, to hunt her out.

Sheba's thoughts churned. Peculiar things had been happening out at Long Bell, Jude had said. The barn burned. And Pete shot at. By whom? And why had Ad Corey picked the Bald Hill line shack for this mysterious rendezvous with Pete? Bald Hill was on High Cross land. Why would anybody from Long Bell be coyoting around up there, unless—

Abruptly, Sheba made her decision. Bald Hill was on her way home. And Duke Lantry was certainly no reason for her to stay here and spend the rest of the night pretending to a gaiety she could not feel. Besides, if Pete Hunt or anyone else from Long Bell thought they could use High Cross property without so much as a say-so, they'd find they had another think coming!

Sheba's eyes clouded. Was that it, really? Wasn't it the fact of the matter that she was still crazily, headstrongly, in love with Pete Hunt, and could not bear the thought that he might be in danger?

The slim-footed little dun hooked to the buckboard jerked up its head as she pulled it around, tooling the buckboard out of the yard.

THE Bald Hill line cabin stood on a high ridge, overlooking Moonstone Canyon, and the narow trail that ran serpentinely up to it was too narrow to accommodate a buckboard. So, upon reaching the entrance to the canyon, Sheba Payne stepped down from her rig and tied the dun to a hackberry beside the road. From where she stood the cabin itself was invisible, but she had made this climb many a time on horseback, and felt no particular apprehension, now, at the prospect of going up afoot.

What did disturb her, and what still puzzled her, was why Ad Corey had so hurriedly summoned Pete Hunt to this out-of-the-way spot. And why, instead of coming to town to deliver his own message, had he sent in stove-up old Scotty McPherson with it?

Making her way slowly along the circuitous path, Sheba felt a stab of foreboding. Now that she thought of it, she hadn't seen Scotty come into the town hall. Could it be that Bobby Young had made up that story out of the whole cloth? Now, Sheba was remembering what Ma Henson had told Jude, about seeing Bobby and Ad Corey at Moonstone Falls, in each other's arms. Suppose Pete should be riding into some kind of a trap?

Sheba's heart pounded. She had been climbing steadily, doggedly, for five minutes. Now, emerging upon a small clearing, she came into view of the shack. A prickling shiver ran through her as she stared at its darkened window, at the batten door hanging twistedly from a single sagging shingle. An eerie silence lay over the place. She moved cautiously to the paneless window and peered inside. A shaft of moonlight palely illuminated the interior. The shack was empty.

A sudden nervous trembling seized Sheba as she swung around. Had she made a mistake? She was sure Bobby Young had said Bald Hill. She could feel her heart going like a trip-hammer now, under her tightly laced stays. She stared down the slippery shale-strewn slope, up which she had just climbed. Slowly, she started picking her way downward. The moon had passed under a cloud, and for the moment darkness shrouded all the familiar landmarks. Shadows of boulders loomed grotesquely, capped by halos of mist that seemed like ghostly white hands, warning her back.

A third of the way down she reached a narrow bench, and halted to catch her breath. And at that moment she heard the sound—a faint rustling in the brush, from below her somewhere.

The moon rolled out of its cradle of cloud and spread a blanket of silver on the cut bank sheering off from the trail a few yards to her left. Crouched behind a clump of liveoak, she peered out and down. At the same instant she went rigid with shock. Down there, between a pair of low boulders, a man lay sprawled. He was easing a rifle barrel through a slit in the rocks—sighting it toward the entrance to the canyon road, a hundred yards below.

Sheba felt her stomach knot. Then she heard the other sound—hoofbeats pounding along the road from town—and a freezing paralysis gripped her. That would be Pete! Pete, riding on unsuspectingly into the gun sights of that hidden drygulcher down there. . . .

Wildly, Sheba glanced around her as the hoofbeats grew steadily louder. Three or four yards to her left, a tiny boulder hung precariously to the rim of the ledge. She sucked in her breath and began crawling toward it, slowly, stealthily. Then she was behind it, pushing against it with all her strength. She felt it tilt, and with a desperate effort braced and gave a final mighty heave. It teetered sickeningly for an instant. Then, with crashing roar, it was going down.

Sheba swayed, feeling waves of dizziness roll against her. She heard a frantic scream, then dimly realized it was her own voice, pitched high with terror. The

ground beneath her seemed to be giving way. She took a step backward, and abruptly, the moonlight dissolved into total blackness. . . .

"GOOD THING," Pete Hunt was saying with deliberate calm, "that you were able to tip that rock. And I reckon it must have been the hand of the Almighty that guided it."

Sheba shivered. "He—he's dead, then?"

Pete nodded grimly. "But you've got to look at it this way. If he wasn't, I would be."

"I know. But it's awful to think . . .

Sheba's words fell away, and she leaned back with a sigh against the horsehair seat of the buckboard. A delicious feeling of lassitude was stealing through her. She glanced up at Pete's face.

"Pete? This—this Bobby Young. It's hard to believe she knew—I mean, Ad planning to—"

"People get money-crazy," Pete interrupted her gently, "and they do funny things, sometimes." He leaned forward and whacked absently at the dun with the tips of his reins.

"Bobby," he went on, "was a dance-hall girl. She was working with a troupe called 'The Boomer Belles' when I finally located her, down there in Oklahoma City. I offered to buy her interest in Long Bell right then, but she wouldn't hear of it. Found out later that this Corey was an old flame of hers." He let out a sigh. "Bobby wanted it all or nothing, I guess, and figured Ad Corey was the boy who could fix it so she could get the whole hog."

Dazedly, Sheba shook her head. "It all sounds so fantastic! I still can't believe it."

"Maybe you can believe this." Pete Hunt had been fumbling in the pocket of his jacket. Now he brought out a small tissue-wrapped package. "This is a little present I bought you while I was in Oklahoma City," he said. "I aimed to give it to you first crack out of the box. But—well, you didn't give me a chance, that day you rode over to Long Bell. And later, when you never answered my letter . . ."

"Letter! But I never got any letter!"

"That's funny." Pete Hunt scowled. "I gave it to Eddie Ducas to take over." He sighed, saying, "Well, that's just one more thing. I suppose Ad Corey must have gotten his hands on it. Likely told Eddie he was going to town, and would stop off with it." He placed the package in her lap. "I—well, I guess I shouldn't be surprised that you began to think I was a fourflusher."

Sheba's fingers shook, untying the ribboned bow on the package. "Pete, I guess I did have doubts. But I never did stop—I mean, you were always the only one. . . ."

"Hadn't you better look at your gift?" Pete interrupted her gently. "I copied down something in it that's—well, sort of an apology."

Eagerly, now, Sheba tore the last bit of tissue wrapping from a tiny oblong box and lifted the cover. Inside lay a small leather-bound volume. Stamped in gold on the cover were the words: *Complete Poems of Thomas Moore.*

"Oh, Pete!" Her fingers were trembling again as she opened it to the flyleaf. There, written in Pete's bold, angular handwriting, were the words:

"The heart that has truly loved never forgets,
But as truly loves on to the close;
As the sunflower turns on her god when he sets
The same look which she'd turned when he rose."

With all my love,
Pete.

Pete was stopping the buckboard as she closed the book. Tears swam in her eyes as she looked up at his quizzically puckered mouth.

"Oh, Pete, Pete!" she breathed. And then she was crushed in his arms, and the book slid from her lap. Neither one of them noticed it, lying neglected on the floor of the buckboard, for a long, long time. ♥ ♥ ♥

By Bess Rogers

Vainly she tried to remember that he belonged to Laurie. . . .

Heartbreak Crossing

There was just one thing wrong with the wedding gown Marcia was sewing: tomorrow her best friend would wear it . . . to marry Marcia's man!

MARCIA MILNER stood expectantly at the corral gate watching the narrow ribbon of road that wound back across the prairie. Then, as a vehicle topped a rise, color flamed in her cheeks, and she tried vainly to stop the unreasonable beating of her heart. She tried to con-

vince herself that in time she would learn to be calm and composed concerning Hal Streeter. But she wasn't making much headway. This feeling she had for him was growing more intolerable each day.

It had to stop. Hal was engaged to her best friend, Laurie Dean.

It had been like this since the first day she came to Big Jake Crossing, and Hal had driven in the mail stage. Sometimes the stage brought passengers, sometimes not, but always Hal was there: tall, dark, attractive in his devil-may-care Western way.

A few months ago her father had been hired for the job of keeping the stage station at Big Jake, half way between the railhead at Custerville and Fort Rocky Bluff across the range country. He had been on the job only a short time when he was thrown from a horse, breaking his leg in two places. He had wanted to return to his farm near Custerville, but Marcia had insisted on taking over until he recovered.

John Milner never would have gotten the job in the first place except for Laurie Dean, whose father was a power in those parts. Marcia had met Laurie when they both attended school at Custerville. Strangely enough, a strong friendship had developed between the two girls, although they were very different. Laurie had persuaded her father to hire John Milner to run the stage station across the road from Dean's Trading Post at Big Jake Crossing. Jason Dean had not been easy to persuade, for it had meant the ousting of a man who had long been a trusted employee.

But the money provided by the job had been a godsend to Marcia and her father, since the drought had completely destroyed their crops, and they had no money for seed to plant again. They were on the verge of losing the homestead. Laurie Dean had been a friend in need.

Marcia loved this unspoiled range country, the beautifully timbered Washita, and her daily tasks here at the stage station. Then, of course, there was Hal Streeter.

Today the stage carried no passengers. Hal nodded, his smiling, whimsical face suddenly alight. "Howdy, Marcia," he called. "How's the little station-keeper today?"

Throwing the lines to the ground, he jumped lightly from the carriage and unhitched his sweat-lathered team, to replace it with a fresh one that Marcia had harnessed and ready at the gate.

She watched him snap the traces and pick up the lines before she answered, giving her heart time to behave itself.

"I'm all right, thanks, Hal. But the doc says Dad will be laid up with his broken leg for another month."

Hal pushed his hat to the back of his head and leaned against the carriage to roll a cigarette.

"That means I'll be seeing you every day for a month." He smiled down at her, his dark eyes unreadable as midnight stars. "Will you ride to the crossing with me? You know the station-keeper has to see that the crossing is kept in good shape."

Marcia hesitated. "The crossing is all right. It isn't necessary to go today."

But with a teasing laugh, Hal picked her up as though she were a featherweight and sat her in the carriage.

"It's part of your job to see that the mail gets across the river, Miss Milner," he said with mock solemnity. "You'll have to come with me every day."

She tossed her black curls from her face, lowering her dark lashes. Hal must not find in her eyes the surging joy his nearness had brought.

"All right, if you want to be mean about it," she said, pretending anger.

At the crossing they walked with fingers interlaced to the bank of the clear, gurgling little stream. A willow, bending low, playfuly dipped frond fingers into its cool water. The air was warm, and the odor of sun on moist earth lulled away every unwelcome thought.

Abstractedly, Marcia looked down the stream to where an old ferry, used in periods of high water, was tied to a cottonwood tree a few feet below the crossing. Sunlight gleamed on its red, mud-caked sides, giving it the appearance of a cut-out valentine. Smiling, she led the way across the rough boards of the anchored boat.

"I hope the rains don't come until Dad gets well," she said, trying to be casual. "I might not be able to get the mail across if that happened."

"Big Horse always helps with the ferry," he told her reassuringly. His gaze moved to the Indian's small rowboat tied to the ferry. "Soon as the river starts to rise, he'll be here. He knows this river better than he does his squaw."

"Which might not be too well," Marcia countered, her laughter mingling with the music of the swift-flowing little stream.

"Does any man ever understand a woman?" Hal asked.

"How should I know?" she answered, still making an effort to speak lightly. "Anyway, let's not try to solve any deep problems today." She drew a long, tremulous breath. "This is a place for relaxing. It's so nice and peaceful."

"It's nice when you're here." His strong hand pressed her fingers tighter, and her heart started acting up again. "Maybe any place would be nice with you."

Something in his eyes held her own, causing her breath to come in a sharp, sudden gasp. Vainly she tried to throw off the dizzying force that was drawing her to him—to remember that he belonged to Laurie.

Hal's hands were on her shoulders, and for a moment there was deep, tense silence, broken only by the conversation of two birds building their nest in the tree above. Then, "Marcia, Marcia, darlin'," he murmured, his voice husky.

Suddenly his arms were around her, drawing her close, his lips seeking to find

IN THAT moment she forgot that Hal belonged to Laurie, forgot everything except that she loved him. His firm young mouth was warm and possessive on her full, red lips. His arms about her were strong and comforting. It was as if she had been waiting all her life for his arms to hold her like this, for his mouth to take hers and make it his own.

He too seemed to have forgotten, until the rustling of the bushes on the river bank revealed the Indian, Big Horse, walking toward the ferry.

He let her go then, and stood looking down at her, his handsome face creased in a frown. "I—honestly didn't mean to do that, Marcia. It just happened. I'm sorry."

"You don't need to be," she said, fighting for control.

"Sometimes I wish I had never met Laurie."

"Don't say that, Hal," she said brokenly. "Laurie loves you . . ." He could never know what effort the words cost her, for her dark head came up, and her blue eyes, like misted morning violets, met his unflinchingly. "After all, what's a kiss?" she added lightly. "It really meant nothing."

"It didn't?" His hands grasped her shoulders, hurting, yet the pain gave her savage joy. "Don't lie to me, Marcia!"

She broke away. "I must go back. Laurie wants me to help with her sewing."

They started back toward the stage, but Big Horse stopped them as they left the ferry.

"How," he greeted solemnly, his leathery face unscrutable. "White girl come Indian's camp. Arapahoes like see station-man's papoose."

"Of course I'll come, Chief Big Horse," Marcia smiled, losing some of her tenseness. "I'll come this afternoon."

The Indian grunted again and moved on across the ferry to his row boat.

At the stage, Hal said, "Good-by then—until tomorrow," and stepped lightly up to the diver's seat. He slapped the lines

across the horses' backs and went splashing across the shallow water.

Marcia watched the rig until it disappeared among the trees on the opposite bank of the river. . . .

Slowly then, her heart full of aching desolation, she turned back toward the stage station, head bowed, hands jammed into her jeans pockets.

Why should life be so unfair? Why should Laurie have Hal, when she had everything already a girl could want—fine clothing, jewelry, money to spend? Her father's trading post and stage station had long been a landmark in this range country. Ranchers came there for their mail and to buy supplies. The endless stream of freighters on the road to Fort Rocky Bluff stopped to trade. Indian tribes camped along the Washita spent their government allotments there. Jason Dean had grown wealthy in the frontier country.

Absorbed in her thoughts, Marcia didn't see Laurie until the white-stockinged bay came to a prancing halt in front of her.

"Hello, Marcia," Laurie greeted, a shade of suspicion in voice. "Where have you been? You look gloomy."

Why shouldn't I be gloomy, Marcia's heart cried, *when I'm losing everything in life that counts?*

But she only yawned, replying, "This spring weather makes me lazy. I'm going to take the afternoon off and go to the Arapaho camp."

"But you promised to help me with my wedding dress this afternoon," Laurie protested.

"Not today," Marcia said quickly. The thought was unbearable. She couldn't sew Laurie's wedding dress today. She would go to the Indian camp and try for a little while to forget Laurie and her wedding plans. By tomorrow she would have hold of herself.

"I promised Chief Big Horse I would come to the camp this afternoon."

"Marcia, you know how anxious I am to get the dress finished," Laurie pleaded. "I don't want anything to delay my wedding—not anything."

"You know how the Indians are," Marcia evaded. "If you make a promise, they expect you to keep it."

"Of course I know—all too well. That dirty, knife-carrying tribe! I want to marry Hal and get away from them just as fast as possible."

Marcia sighed. "Anyway, since I promised . . ."

"Why did you promise?" Laurie answered crossly. "I don't know why you want to go to the dirty place anyway. But if you must, I'll go with you."

Oh, no! Marcia thought. *Not this, when I want so much to get away from her!*

"It's sweet of you, Laurie," she said weakly, "but I don't mind going alone."

"Of course I'll go," Laurie said determinedly. "Why shouldn't I?"

Marcia felt resistance draining from her. "All right," she said dispiritedly. "I'll go home and sort the mail; then I'll be ready."

SHE finished the task quickly, the flying of her fingers seeming to ease the pain in her heart. She had no fancy riding clothes to don, so she was ready even before Laurie and waiting at the hitchrack in front of the stage station.

When Laurie finally emerged from the trading post, she was accompanied by the young rancher, Jed Jackson. The two were so engrossed in each other they seemed not to see Marcia at all. They walked slowly around to the side of the building where Laurie's bay was ground-hitched.

Marcia's impatience gave way to interest, then to incredulousness, as she saw Jed's arms reach out to draw Laurie close. Laurie stood on tiptoes and raised her arms, clasping her hands tightly about his neck. Their lips met in a lingering kiss.

It was unbelievable! Laurie was to marry Hal in a few short weeks—but here she was, kissing another man. Marcia was sure

she was not the kind of a girl to give her kisses promiscuously. Still, if she loved Hal . . .

It was all too bewildering. And she didn't have time to think about it anyway, for Laurie had mounted, waved good-by to Jed, and was galloping across to the stage station.

The Arapaho camp was some three miles away, nestling in a bend of the river where the fringe of timber widened into a forest. It consisted of a dozen or so tepees and a few brush arbors scattered among the trees. The white spray of Big Jake Falls was visible through the timber, and its subdued roar sounded in the distance.

"Nice place for the village," Marcia observed.

Laurie's lip curled. "The place would be nicer without it. I've tried to persuade Father to have the Arapahoes moved farther away from the trading post, but he won't. Afraid of offending them. He wants their business. Anyway, he doesn't mind them like I do."

Chief Big Horse met them in front of the camp. They tied their horses and wandered among the tents, passing a number of bucks sitting on the ground whittling strange, weird little objects from green willow. Marcia spoke to the ones she knew, calling them by name, but Laurie walked beside her silently, head high.

Laurie relaxed a little when they came upon some women doing beautiful bead work. "Nice," she told them briefly, admiring some of the designs. Then they passed on.

Marcia patted a papoose on the head, slipping him a cooky from the bag she had brought for the children.

"I've heard an Indian never forgets, once you've won his friendship," she told Laurie.

"Who wants their friendship?" Laurie clipped.

"It's better to have the friendship of anybody than his enmity," Marcia declared.

A big spotted hound was noisily lapping water from a bowl in front of a tent they were passing. As the dog quenched his thirst and sat back on his haunches licking water from around his mouth, a small child ran out of the tepee, picked up the bowl and drank the water to the muddy dregs.

Marcia held out her hand with a cooky. In his eagerness for the rare tid-bit, the child dropped the bowl, splashing the muddy water on Laurie's new white riding boots and fringed skirt.

Laurie looked down at her spoiled finery, her face flaming. "You filthy brat!" she stormed. She raised her hand and struck the boy's brown cheek sharply.

"Oh Laurie," Marcia protested, "you shouldn't have done that!"

But a far sharper protest was coming out of the tepee. The child's mother, jabbering a stream of Arapaho, was making toward them, calling her offspring back inside. A long, sharp knife, used for skinning animals, hung from the squaw's belt.

"Here, take these." Marcia hastily held out the bag of cakes. "I make them. Bring more tomorrow."

The woman disregarded the peace offering, unmistakable fury in her sharp black eyes.

"Give her one of your rings—your necklace!" Marcia whispered into Laurie's ear.

Quickly the merchant's daughter offered the jewelry, her face pale, cold fear in her dark eyes.

The squaw paid no attention to the glittering trinkets. Worriedly Marcia looked at the murderous knife, saw savage intent grow in the woman's eyes.

Then Big Horse, who had been following a short distance behind, placed himself between his tribeswoman and the white girls. He spoke to the squaw in her own dialect, quickly and persuasively.

The woman turned sullenly back into her tepee. But the look she gave Laurie as she closed the wolf-skin flap boded no good for

the white girl, and Laurie looked scared.

Turtle Face, the father of the child Laurie had struck, stood beside the door of the tent, folded arms holding his blanket tightly about him, his face rigidly stern. Outlines of hatchet and knife in his belt were clearly visible beneath the tightly held blanket.

The girls walked on, but a tenseness, like the first hushed breath of an approaching storm, lay over the camp of the Arapahoes.

"Indians no like store man's girl," Big Horse told them reluctantly. "Better go."

Silently they followed Big Horse back to their waiting mounts.

ON THE ride home Marcia couldn't get away from the feeling that sharp, angry eyes were watching. The crackling of a twig beneath her horse's hoof caused her to start and glance apprehensively toward the timber fringing the river banks. At the whirring up of a bob white beside the road, Marcia drew her horse to a sudden halt.

"Maybe we better leave the river road," she suggested uneasily.

Laurie tried to laugh it off, but there was little mirth in her laughter. "Guess I shouldn't have slapped the kid," she admitted. "But I was so upset about getting my new skirt spoiled."

"I'm afraid the Indians will—"

"They wouldn't dare harm me," Laurie interrupted, but her voice did not carry conviction. "My father has influence at the Indian Agency. He could have them punished."

"Maybe we should speak to your father."

Laurie shook her head, fear haunting her dark eyes. "No, no, it wouldn't do any good. He wouldn't understand. He never has."

For the first time Marcia saw deep into the heart of Laurie Dean. Saw fear of the Indians among whom she lived, stark and real, but for all that a stubborn pride that kept her from admitting it. She saw a father who loved his money more than his daughter. Spoiled and selfish though Laurie was, Marcia felt genuine pity for her.

She began to understand also why Laurie had been so insistent that John Milner be hired to keep the stage station. She wanted Marcia's companionship because she was afraid of being alone. And Marcia had thought it was because she liked her so much!

All the next day Laurie was pale, cross and irritable. Her father thought the wedding preparations were getting on her nerves. He thought it best to have the wedding date moved nearer.

When Hal drove in from Custerville, Jason Dean called him across to the trading post before Marcia had a chance to speak with him at all.

He returned shortly, but the few minutes at the trading post had changed him. His eyes would not meet hers. He stepped into the carriage quickly and drove away toward the crossing without asking her to go. He didn't even say good-by.

He had been gone only a short time when Laurie came running over, gaily waving a piece of the wedding dress. "It's tomorrow," she told Marcia breathlessly. "You must help me finish my dress this afternoon. Hal and I will be married tomorrow when he comes back from Rocky Bluff!"

Marcia's head whirled. She had counted on time, and now time had run out on her. She had even thought of telling Hal about seeing Laurie kiss Jed, but deep in her heart she knew she could never do it. Then there was the hope that Hal might come to see Laurie as she really was, and there would be no wedding.

But here was the wedding dress, to be finished today, countless stitches in the long, many gored skirt.

The two girls sat opposite each other, the work spread out on the table. As Marcia's needle flashed through the soft folds of the dainty white material, her heart was lead, and her fingers were icy cold. This beauti-

ful garment might have graced her own slim body, except for the tall, commanding beauty of Laurie Dean. Her lowered eyelids stung with unshed tears when she thought how precious each stitch would be if the wedding dress were her own.

She dared not look at the girl sitting across from her, red lips curved in a complacent smile, shining blonde hair falling carelessly over her shoulders. For hatred was trying to force its way into Marcia's heart—hatred for the girl who had befriended her.

"I'm so glad Father and Hal decided it should be tomorrow," Laurie confided gaily.

"Yes," Marcia replied, dragging her heart over white hot coals. "It must be wonderful. But, Laurie, are you sure? About Hal, I mean. I have sometimes thought you were in love with Jed."

A flash of annoyance crossed Laurie's face, but her great dark eyes were veiled behind heavy lashes. "If I married Jed, I'd have to keep on living in this God-forsaken range country. All my life I've wanted to get away from it. And now I'm going. Hal and I will live in Custerville among civilized people."

"You mean—surely you're not marrying Hal only to get away from here!" Marcia was incredulous. "Do you mean you don't really love Hal?"

"I didn't say that," Laurie denied. "Hal is a nice boy. Father says so himself. I'm going to marry him."

"You don't have to leave here—" Marcia's words tripped over each other in her eagerness. "Maybe your father would move his store to Custerville."

"Never!" Laurie's red lips curled scornfully. "He likes it here. He'll stay here till he dies."

"If you would only explain how you feel —" Marcia was looking at Laurie now, her blue eyes clear and straightforward. "Oh Laurie, don't you see? It wouldn't be fair to Hal—to Jed."

"Leave Jed out of this." A look of suspicion darted from Laurie's black eyes. "Marcia Milner, I believe you've been spying on me!"

In the tenseness following her sudden outbreak, neither of the girls seemed to breathe. The sound of a pin, dropping from the basted folds of the wedding dress, crashed loudly against Marcia's taut nerves.

"No, but I couldn't help seeing—"

"So that's the way it is!" Laurie sprang to her feet, flame darting from her eyes. "You'd like to break up my plans! You love Hal yourself!"

"I'm trying to be your friend, Laurie."

"How do I know?" she stormed. "Hal acted very strangely when Father asked to have the wedding date set for tomorrow. Maybe you've been telling him—" Choking rage cut off her words.

"No, Laurie, I—"

"And after all I've done for you!" She snatched the unfinished dress from Marcia's hands. Whirling, she dashed furiously out of the house and across the road to the trading post.

Stunned, Marcia stood in the doorway looking after the retreating figure. "She wants to live among civilized people!" she choked. "Why, she's more savage at heart than Turtle Face!"

MARCIA didn't see Laurie again during the afternoon. At dusk the rain started falling, keeping her inside.

All night it rained, coming down in torrents, as though the elements were crying the tears Marcia couldn't shed. Restless and wide awake, she tossed the night through.

If only she could have talked with Hal when he came through this morning; if only she could have gone to the crossing with him. She knew now that Laurie would never make him happy—wouldn't even try. While she, if only she had the opporunity, would devote every breath, every thought, every prayer to making his life full and

complete—because she truly loved him.

Now it was too late.

Tomorrow when Hal returned from Fort Rocky Bluff, he would bring the minister who would marry him to Laurie Dean. . . .

The clouds broke away at dawn, and Marcia walked down to the crossing. The river was steadily rising. There must have been extremely heavy rain farther up the stream, judging by the mud-laden water that was swirling down. There was an undertone of menace in its low murmur. Hourly, she drove stakes at the water's edge to gage the rise. The singing river was fast becoming a raging torrent.

The water was too deep to ford already. Marcia made a trip to the Arapaho village and brought Big Horse to help with the ferry.

They tied one end of a huge rope cable to the big cottonwood on the bank. Then Big Horse took the heavy coil in his rowboat, crossed the river, and secured the other end to a tree on the opposite bank. A wagon driver, waiting to cross, oiled the pulleys that operated on the cable to pull the boat across.

Marcia watched with apprehension as the man drove his heavily loaded wagon out onto the small, flat ferry and untied the anchor. She couldn't restrain a shudder as he wound the windlass and started the boat slowly moving across the swirling, yellow water. But as the trip was made across and back without incident, she lost her fears and began to help Big Horse with the operation herself.

All morning a crowd of ranchers, Indians, freighters, and covered-wagon pilgrims stood about on the muddy banks watching the little boat battle the raging stream. Whirling, foaming water lashed at it, as though to tear it loose from the stout cable. Debris lodged against it and had to be pried away—tree limbs, fence posts, dead cattle. There was a smell of decay in the muddy water.

Marcia was almost grateful for the tasks that kept her so busy keeping the vehicles in line to wait their turn, collecting fees, seeing to it that the trips were made with the minimum of delay. It kept her conscious mind from dwelling on Hal's approaching marriage, though inside, despair was welling up in her like a raging flood. She was thankful that she had to stay at the crossing, for it relieved her of helping with the wedding preparations. She knew that as the time approached, she could not have stood it. She would have had to run away.

The flood reached its crest at about three o'clock in the afternoon, the dread hour that was hanging like a black pall over Marcia's mind. It was the hour when Hal would return from Rocky Bluff with the minister. The wedding would take place at the trading post almost immediately. . . .

A few minutes before three Laurie came down to the crossing, looking more beautiful than Marcia had ever seen her. She wore her wedding dress with the long, flowing skirt, with frills of lace at the throat and wrists. The sun glinted on the shining blonde braids wound about her small, proud head.

Surely her coming down here had not been in the wedding plans, Marcia thought. Why did she do it? Probably another of her foolish, impulsive whims. Maybe she wanted to parade her beauty before the crowds on the river banks, thinking Hal would be proud of her.

Yes, Hal would be proud of her. How could he help it? Marcia looked down at her own dirty levis and muddy boots, and clenched her small fists until the nails bit into her hard little palms. Unshed tears burned against her eyelids.

Suddenly she realized that until this very moment she had carried a hidden hope that something would happen to prevent the marriage. Maybe Hal would be delayed for some reason. Maybe he would receive last minute orders not to cross the treacherous river with the mail.

Now that hope was gone. For Hal was driving up on the other side.

She closed her eyes, swallowing hard. This was it. The end of everything.

LAURIE was walking toward her, an indulgent smile on her red lips. "I'm going to meet Hal on the other side," she told Marcia. "A surprise. Take me across, please."

The roughly clad men on the river bank stared open-mouthed. Laurie seemed like a person from another world, a person who had no part in this grim, savage battle with the raging river.

"I'll find Big Horse," Marcia managed, steadying her voice.

He was nowhere in sight.

"I saw the Indian take his rowboat across to the other side," a spectator offered.

"Why did he do that?" Laurie asked, her voice edged with suspicion.

Marcia shook her head. "I don't know. He may have seen something in the water he wanted to drag out."

"You should keep him on the job," Laurie said crossly. "My father pays him."

"Nobody much wants to cross now," Marcia explained. "The water is too high. People are turning back."

Laurie glanced sharply at Marcia. "Take me across, please."

"I can't without help. The current is too strong."

Laurie looked hopefully at the men on the bank, some sitting idly on a fallen tree trunk, some squatting on their heels, others leaning against the cottonwoods, hands in their pockets.

"I wouldn't cross, lady, was I in your place," a bearded old rancher advised.

A flush ran up Laurie's cheeks. "You little cheat!" she gritted into Marcia's ear. "You sent the Indian away to keep me from crossing. Think you'll stop my wedding! Well, I'll show you!"

"What do I care which side of the river you're married on?" Marcia asked raggedly. "Go ahead, if you can find someone to help."

Laurie shrugged, her eyes sweeping the group on the shore disdainfully. "If you're all afraid to go, I'll take the boat across myself!"

Marcia was aghast. "You wouldn't dare!"

"The boat belongs to my father," Laurie said haughtily.

Gathering up the long, graceful skirt of her wedding gown, she stepped to the edge of the water and quickly untied the anchor.

The men looked on with curiosity, paused in their whittling and spitting. Surely no woman would challenge those savage waters alone! Before they could grasp the significance of what was happening, Laurie had started turning the windlass, and the boat was moving out into the flood.

Marcia watched, dumfounded that Laurie was actually trying to take the boat across alone. It was easy at first, but wait until she hit the current. . . .

"Watch out!" one of the men on the bank shouted.

An uprooted tree was coming down in mid-stream. The boat would run into it if Laurie persisted.

"Work your tackle back this way!" the man shouted. "Let the tree go by!"

Laurie reversed the tackle, moving the ferry back a little.

Breathlessly, Marcia was watching something on the other side. It was a far greater menace than the floating tree. She was seeing the quick flash of a shining hatchet at the tree where the cable was anchored on the other side, then the waving of bushes marking his trail as the Indian, Turtle Face, fled. He was getting his revenge on Laurie for slapping his child!

Marcia ran to the edge of the water, screaming, "Laurie, come back! The cable's been cut! You can't go on!"

Laurie was not smiling now. Her air of bravado had gone. She was scared.

The drifting tree caught on the end of the boat. Laurie pulled with all her might, trying to bring the ferry back, but it didn't move. The tree was snagged on the bottom, holding the boat fast.

Then the cable snapped, and slowly crawled down into the water. Laurie gave one look at the severed rope, and stood motionless, her face frozen with still, white horror.

Through cupped hands Marcia shouted, "Hold the cable on the other side of your tackle!" But her voice was drowned by the roaring water and the yelling of the men on the shore.

Soon the tree holding the ferry would be swept away by the swift current. The boat would then slide free of the cable and be at the mercy of the raging river. Laurie would be swept into the rushing flood.

Marcia saw instantly what she must do. Grabbing the cable, she swung out over the water, working her way hand over hand. The cable sagged with her weight, and she was waist deep in water when she reached the ferry and leaped over the hand rail. Swiftly she ran to the other end of the boat, caught the loose cable and tried to fasten it to the hand rail.

Through the din, Marcia heard Hal yelling at them from the other side, but she couldn't make out what he was saying. She had a flashing glimpse of Big Horse, gesturing wildly. Then he was running swiftly as only those of his race can run. Hal was desperately trying to keep alongside.

Marcia lost sight of them for an instant. Then she saw the Indian's rowboat bobbing on the water, Hal and Big Horse struggling against the savage waves.

"They're crazy!" someone on the bank yelled. "They can't hold that little boat against the current. It will overturn."

At that moment, the tree broke away from the ferry and floated downstream. The boat swerved. The cable was slipping.

Laurie started wringing her hands, and little whining sounds came from her throat. Marcia caught the cable, holding on desperately.

"Shut up and help!" she screamed at the terror-stricken girl.

It was a hopeless, losing struggle. They both held on with all their strength, but the cable was slipping through their hands.

The boat tilted on its side, leaving the girls clinging at the hand rail, their heads barely above water.

"Keep holding," Marcia sobbed. "Hal will come."

She could see the rowboat not far away, tossing about on the rushing flood. Now it was almost swept under by the swift current, to come in the clear again a little nearer. Then it was frantically trying to pull out of the way of a huge log.

Marcia went down into a black, wet smother, as the writhing, swirling water tried to pull her away from the hand rail. Her boots tried to drag her down. Her ears were filled with the angry, savage roar.

Her head was above water again.

The rowboat was much nearer. She could hear words of encouragement. Deep, tender words, intended for Laurie, of course. But, *Dear Heaven,* Marcia prayed, *let me pretend he means me—for this little while.*

Vaguely she was aware of Hal grasping her shoulders, pulling her into the rowboat. "Marcia, Marcia darlin'," he seemed to be saying.

Then Hal was steadying the boat while Big Horse, grunting loudly, pulled Laurie in beside Marcia.

Again the little boat, with its added burden, fought the mad stream, a task of almost superhuman strength. But the determination of Hal Streeter and the skill of the Indian could not be outdone.

As the men drew the boat into a shallow backwater half a mile downstream, a thunderous roar sounded, and the four drew breath sharply. It was the ferry crashing over Big Jake Falls.

With the realization of safety, Laurie's

(Continued on page 111)

Sweetheart's Welcome

ALL the romance and excitement of life in a frontier Army post will be yours to share next issue, for heading the fiction lineup is Francis Flick's novelette about a lovely and vivacious brunette who took Fort Lincoln by storm. Debra's visit got off to a bad start, for her handsome fiancé, Lieutenant Cort Fielding, was off with his troop and couldn't meet her. The next morning, however, things changed. . . .

Men were spilling out of the barracks and lining up for muster, and Debra ducked back from the window. There were unmistakable sounds of morning activity downstairs, and she hurriedly selected a blue and white gingham.

Opening her bedroom door, she heard her brother's spurs jangle, then his voice as it faded behind a closing door. But she'd also heard a man's answering voice, and she could scarcely catch her breath. Cort was here! Debra flew down the stairs.

A lean tall man in uniform stood looking up at her from the dimly lit hall, the light against his back.

"Oh, darling, darling!" she cried and threw herself into his arms.

He pulled her tight against his hard body, and his lips were firm and warm against her mouth. Debra forgot their long year of separation as she eagerly answered his kiss. She clung to him, her arms tightening around his neck, recklessly, joyously giving him her love. Then he kissed her eyes and her throat, and his mouth found hers again.

The parlor door opened and a shaft of light cut across the hall. Debra pulled away from him reluctantly.

Then her dark eyes widened in horror as she stared up into the man's face. For a moment, her heart stood still. This wasn't Cort Fielding. It was a man she'd never seen before in her life!

"Who—who are you?" she whispered.

"Private Jed Taylor, ma'am. Captain Yates' orderly for today." He smiled. "Errand boy, ma'am, if you prefer."

Debra's face burned. She choked, "How dared you—"

"Debby! Debby!" Her little niece, Betsy, ran into the hall and threw herself at Debra.

Debra knelt down and held her close. "Betsy! How I've missed you, darling."

The child's arms tightened conculsively around her neck. Then she smiled up at Jed. "Debby's my favorite aunt, Jed," she said. "Will you take her riding with us?"

"I'll take her anywhere—any time," he promised, grinning.

Furious anger boiled through Debra. This Jed Taylor had known she was Captain Yates' sister, yet he, an enlisted man, had had the effrontery to kiss her as she'd never been kissed before. Her cheeks burned with shame as she tried to face down the mockery in his dark eyes.

"Shall I report my conduct to the captain, ma'am?" he asked with a slow, easy smile. "It would still be worth spending the rest of my life in the guard house on bread and water."

She looked at him levelly. "It was just a case of mistaken identity in a dimly lit hall, Private. And of no consequence."

"I think you're wrong, ma'am," he told her very softly. "I don't think you'll ever forget it either.. . ."

That's all we can tell you of Debra's thrilling story now, friends, but you'll find Francis Flick's complete novelette, "Soldier, I Surrender!", in the February issue—published Nov. 26th. —THE EDITOR

OUTCAST GIRLS DON'T CRY

Should fiery Kay gain revenge for last year's jilting—at the cost of this year's love?

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Romantic Old-West Novelette

By Herbert A. Woodbury

The man was Tom Carey, and the girl was Beth Ames. . . .

THE year's first killing frost had struck the low semi-arid foothills, there at forty-five hundred feet. Beside the trail, the nipped buds of gentian and wild aster hung limply from their stalks. The leaves of the scrub oak shone red through the somber autumnal bottle green of the jackpines. In the noonday sting of the sun, there was a touch of Indian summer, but there was a chill in the

breeze blowing from the high snowcapped Mogolons, a hundred miles to the north.

Up until a second ago, the girl hadn't felt the chill. But she felt it now, striking all the way through to her heart. . . .

Lying to her grandparents as to her destination, Kay Cameron had saddled old Baldy directly after lunch. She had set out alone, and had met young Jack Ames just above Sycamore's almost dry waterfall, the scene of their secret trysts all summer.

Smiling and blond, Jack Ames had come toward her and lifted her down out of her saddle. As she'd melted into his arms, he had kissed her—ardently, and with no hint of what he was going to say in just a moment. But now . . .

Now as they sat there on a log beside the tiny little plume of spray misting down into the pool below them, the man was blurting out, "Kay, I—I'm going to be married."

Kay stared at him. *He* was going to be married? He hadn't used the plural. He hadn't said *we*. . . .

The man's shoulders slumped wearily. He looked down at the green carpet of the earth, averting his eyes from the girl. He was twenty-four, almost four years older than Kay, but his pink and white baby-like complexion made him look young for his age. Whereas the girl's deep tawny hair and even tan gave a look of maturity to her face, if not to her lithe young figure.

"I'm leaving for the East tomorrow," Jack Ames said. "Going to marry a girl who . . ." The blue eyes raised, shifted, again avoided Kay's. "I don't love her, Kay. I hate her. But I—"

His voice came in a passionate torrent now. "I was forced into this engagement with her before I ever came out here. Grew up with her, back home in Philadelphia. Her family and my family were friends, and—I hardly had anything to say about it. Her folks and mine decided it all when we were still in our cradle days. And I—well, I guess I followed the line of least resistance. With my father taking it for granted I'd marry her some day, I preferred peace with him to war."

The man's voice trailed, went on. "Then Dad sent me out here to manage the Circle Star for him. I met you, all lovely and vital and alive, and I— I fell in love with you, Kay. Only . . ."

Jack's voice blurred for a moment. Sitting there, tense and rigid, Kay thought back to the warnings of her grandparents: *Stay away from him, Kay. You think he's going to marry the daughter of a crooked tinhorn gambler? Him? With his family and his money? He's just playing with you, that's all. Passing the time: When he gets 'round to marryin', he'll marry his own kind.*

"Only," the man's voice came again, "I can't marry you, Kay. Kidded myself for a while that I could. I— I wasn't really being dishonest with you. I did mean all I said. I mean it now. It's you I love, not this prissy little prude back home. Only it's no use. Dad's too much for me. He's got me licked."

Jack Ames sighed. His eyes for the moment tried to look into Kay's. "I wrote Dad, and he says that unless I marry the girl he's got picked out for me, it means the end of—" he gestured, including the waterfall, the great pool below where a dozen Circle Star cattle were drinking, the whole vast green valley with its grazing herds—"the end of all this. I lose my job here. I'm disinherited. Nothing in that for either one of us. I don't want poverty. I guess you've had enough of it, yourself. And so . . .

"Look at me, Kay. I'm marrying the girl. Dad's giving me the Circle Star as a wedding present. And then—well, I've a hunch Beth won't like it out here. Not all year 'round, I mean. We'll have to be careful, but there'll be months when she'll be away, when you and I can—"

He didn't finish. Kay Cameron had carried her riding quirt with her over to the

fallen log. She rose now, cheeks scarlet in humiliation. Trembling in fury, she lashed it across Jack Ames' face.

She heard him scream out in pain, like a mongrel dog. She didn't look back. Tawny head held high, she stepped to her pony. She gathered up the reins, was aboard with a leap.

RIDING at a dead reckless lope, she came down the steep trail by the waterfall. At a reckless lope still, she scattered the cattle drinking at the pool below. The autumn landscape blurred past. Kay Cameron rode without seeing, aware of nothing but her own cold fury. Her heart ought to be broken, she guessed, but it wasn't. She felt no heartache at love turned to ashes. Not the littlest twinge of disillusionment.

No. She had known from the very beginning, she guessed, that Jack Ames was like this. Cowardly enough to slander the girl whom he was marrying. Weak and cowardly enough to suggest that even after his marriage, he and Kay could still have their trysts. None of it came as a surprise. She'd always known his shortcomings. Only—only, she had wanted to marry him, anyway! She had wanted to because of what such a marriage would mean to her, the daughter of Diamond Bill Cameron, who had been shot dead by a deputy for cheating at cards. . . .

Kay had never really known her wild, reckless, black-sheep father. She'd been eight, that year when an officer in Santa Fe had pumped six bullets into Diamond Bill Cameron. Her memories were vague: a week at the Brown Palace Hotel in Denver, when she had had a French governess, and her mother had had a rubber-tired victoria and a coachman . . . other weeks, by contrast, in smelly sidestreet boarding houses, when her father's luck had been running against him. All she really remembered was a man who had always been sweet and kind both to her and her mother, a father of whom she wasn't ashamed.

But if Kay, herself, wasn't ashamed of her father, the feeling of the town and the neighborhood here and her grandparents was something else again. Once upon a time, when her father had come courting her mother, Verde City had been a rough, roistering boom camp as tough and wicked as any. Now the days of the trail herds were largely past. Verde City was no longer a hell-roaring stop on the Santa Fe Trail. It had become a quiet, peaceful, ever so respectable little trading post for the surrounding cow country. The migration out here had been largely of Puritan Yankees and the deeply, strictly religious Scotch-Irish. The pendulum had swung in the opposite direction. There was no place for a gentleman gambler of her father's sort in the town today—and precious little place for Kay, herself.

For, as far back as Kay could remember, she had been shunned, snubbed, shied away from. Sure that the wild black blood of her father must show in her some day, other mothers had kept their children away from her. Back in her school days, she had been left out of the parties, the barbecues and the picnics. She had become a perennial wall-flower at the dances when she grew older, or else asked to dance only by the reckless wild bunch.

She had wanted to marry Jack Ames in order to revenge herself upon the town. Married to Jack, with the prestige of the Ames name and the Ames wealth behind her, she could have turned the tables on the town. The town bowed down and kowtowed to the Eastern Ameses, with their Philadelphia background and culture. And if Kay had married Jack, the neighborhood could have snubbed her no longer. The town would have had to kowtow to her, too!

Low-hanging branches whipped at her face, as she plunged on. For a second, tears filled her eyes. Jack was weak, to be sure. But *she'd* have been strong enough for both of them. In her hands—and with *her* pull-

ing the puppet strings—Jack would have amounted to something that even his father could have been proud of! He was mismanaging his father's ranch now, letting it slip into gradual ruin. He was still running longhorns, when the new, chunky, imported Hereford stock was commencing to get the top prices in the East. He had failed to claim and patent his precious waterholes against the inevitable inroads of the settler and the nester, who had already driven cattle out of Kansas. But all this would have been different if he'd had her to guide him. . . .

Kay jerked her pony to a halt. Suddenly, she was aware again of the bright landscape shimmering in its cool, crisp, autumn splendor. The red mist left her eyes. And even if the fury and the feeling of savage frustration didn't leave her heart, still she was suddenly calm. What had she just been thinking of? How Jack Ames had been failing to patent his waterholes?

She had been heading down the long fenced valley, back toward her grandparents' tiny ranch. Now, abruptly, Kay turned her pony; pointed him up over the shoulder of Sunrise Mountain; dropped down again through the red-branched manzanita on the shoulder's far side. Making a bee-line shortcut, she hit the rocky wagon trail to town.

The short autumn day was fading. She rode into the little town of Verde City in the chill haziness of the lavender twilight. She jogged up Main Street, past the two churches, past the drab, weather-beaten false fronts of the Great Western Mercantile Company and of South Brothers, Hay, Grain & Feed. At the corner of Main and Center, she set her buckskin at the hitching rail in front of the Idle Hour Saloon.

It was a wild idea, she guessed. But her father had been a gambler and she could gamble too.

Kay tied her pony. Hesitating only a second, she thrust her way boldly through the wickered, mirrored swinging doors into the sacrosanctly masculine interior of the Idle Hour Saloon.

THE score or so of drunks and loungers standing there at the long bar turned to stare at her. Bull Donaldson, the proprietor of the place came toward her.

"Back room's this way, Miss Kay," he said. "And next time you're meetin' somebody here, use the side entrance. More respectable, see? You can slip in there without anybody seein'."

Kay gave her head a toss. Did Bull think that the wild blood had come out in her at last? Did he think that she had come here to sit in the shabby little back room drinking with some clandestine admirer?

"I'm not looking for the back room," she said. "I want to go upstairs where the wheels are."

Bull halted, nervous now, not quite so sure of himself. Upstairs he ran a subrosa gambling establishment, but it wasn't supposed to be common knowledge.

Suspicion clouding his face, he stammered, "You *what?*"

Kay's hand went into the pocket of her faded blue denim jeans. She took out a couple of crumpled bills.

She said it again, "I want to go upstairs, where they gamble."

Bull stared at her, purple commencing to color his jowls. Maybe it wasn't the wild black blood of her father coming out in her, after all. Maybe it was the strict Scotch-Irish blood of her grandparents. Maybe she was another Carrie Nation with her hatchet, hoping to put him out of business, on a hunt for evidence that he was breaking the law. Bull's manner changed.

"Dunno where you heard about gamblin' upstairs," he said, "but there ain't any. Come on, kid—out!"

A young man had been standing at the bar with an untasted beer in front of him. He turned now, came toward Kay and Bull Donaldson. He was in his twenties. The bronzed face was unwrinkled, unlined. But

the gaunt, bronzed cheeks were lean and set and hard, and the two brown eyes were poised.

He swung in, facing Bull.

"Take your dirty hands off her, Donaldson."

Bull Donaldson released Kay's arm. She turned to take in the young man. And the years crashed and rolled and thundered for an instant. Dimly Kay remembered Tom Carey from her school days. He'd been her one protector, then. No one had ever dared tease her or be mean to her when Tom was around.

Older than Kay by at least a half dozen years, Tom had left school before she had. Son of wild old Pete Carey, who had been continually suspected in those days of rustling and sleepering his neighbor's beef, he'd left the town. Rumors had drifted back that he'd hired out as a gun-fighter in the bloody Lincoln County War. Other rumors had him in jail or hanged on the gallows. . . . But here he stood.

Kay heard Bull's voice, a mixture of deference to Tom and indignant protest. "But damn it, Man, she—"

Kay looked up at Tom Carey. "I wanted to gamble," she told him, "and he tried to tell me I couldn't." She looked back at Bull. "Tom'll vouch for me. Won't you, Tom?"

Only Tom's eyes semed to have changed expression. Warm and friendly without boldness, they were taking Kay in. The man's lips remained a hard straight line.

"As far as vouchin' for you's concerned," he said, "you're vouched for, Kay. Only—"

Kay cut him off before he could lecture her. "Then make him take me upstairs, Tom. I've got ten dollars, and I just have to try to win some more."

Tom's hand had gone into his pocket, was coming out with a fat orange-backed roll. He said, "If it's a loan you need, Kay . . ."

Kay shook her head. Tom was nice. Rumor, and perhaps a pretty good foundation of fact, had him a member of the wild bunch which lived precariously just within the law. Only he'd always been so different from those others in the wild bunch. He'd never chased after women, for one thing. Instinctively she realized that he wasn't offering her money now in the hope of putting her under some future obligation. But it seemed unfair to accept a favor which she mightn't ever be in a position to repay.

Kay pushed the bank roll aside. "That's kind of you, Tom, but I can't take it." She looked back at Bull. "You know who my father was, Bull Donaldson. You'd have let *him* play. And Tom's just vouched for me. How about it?"

There was a little moment of silent byplay. Patently, Bull still didn't like it. This was something new, a girl not quite twenty-one going upstairs to play as a free-lance with her own money. The rouged women who sometimes came up with their men—that was different. The men staked 'em. It wasn't their own money they lost, and they didn't beef about it around the town.

Bull's glance darted to Tom for a cue. Bull's eyes seemed to plead, *I don't like it, but I leave it up to you, Tom; whatever you say goes.*

Tom's eyes meanwhile rested upon Kay. He didn't approve, either, Kay knew. Like so many hombres, wild and reckless themselves, Tom was utterly conventional about women. To Tom, there were only two kinds of women—good and bad. Instinctively Kay realized where Tom placed her.

She was a good woman. She shouldn't be here.

She waited. Tom's taut lips relaxed. He said, "I see, Kay. Got to run that saw-buck into a roll. Life and death, huh?" He looked back at Donaldson. "She's givin' the orders, Bull. Me and you will just have to take them."

He took Kay's arm. Bull Donaldson led the way up the stairs.

CHAPTER TWO

No Reputation to Lose

IT WAS still early, still before supper-time, when Kay risked her first dollar on the red. Bull Donaldson's tight-shuttered upstairs room was almost empty, then. There were only a couple of hangers-on to wander over and stare at the spectacle of a girl playing, and then, caught with a sort of infectious excitement at the novelty of it all, to commence trying to match their luck with hers.

For Kay *was* lucky. She was luckier than she dreamed she'd be. New to the game, over-cautious perhaps, she didn't plunge; she didn't double up on her bets. She simply hazarded one or two silver dollars at a time. But, betting conservatively and sticking to the even money bets, black or red, she was ahead fifty dollars by ten o'clock that night.

She was ahead fifty dollars . . . and the crowd around the table where she was playing was four or five deep.

The rumors started spreading.

"Won five hundred dollars playin' her hunches," somebody said. "Was ahead a thousand when the damned double zero came up. . . ."

All around Kay, men plunged. Gamblers who ordinarily bet five dollars in an evening, bet fifty. The fifty-dollars gamblers shot the works.

At midnight Kay was seventy-five dollars to the good and the men in the crowd were up or down thousands. Then she suddenly darted a terrified glance at the clock.

Panic seized her. Missing supper at home, she had hoped to explain. She would have said her pony had thrown a shoe; she'd had to walk him home. But this! Why, it'd be two or three o'clock in the morning now before she got to the ranch! She gathered up her money. The show, the spectacle which she had been putting on for the crowd, came to an end. The throngs melted away to the bar and to the cashier's booth.

Tom took her arm to see her downstairs. She smiled up at him gratefully, for the way he'd stood by her. Big Bull Donaldson stood at the head of the stairs, blocking their path. Was he angry that she had won so much? Unconsciously Kay moved back, so that her shoulder touched Tom's arm.

Bull wasn't angry, it seemed. There was a curious, dreamy light in his pale blue eyes. He wore the expression of the cat that's just eaten the canary.

His voice vibrated with friendliness as he said, "Talk to you a minute alone before you go, Miss Kay?"

Kay felt Tom's fingers tighten on her arm. "If you've got anything to say, Bull," he snapped, "say it mighty quick. And say it here."

The two men's glances locked. Bull's eyes seemed to wander for a moment to the twin guns on Tom's hips. He forced a sheepish, flustered grin.

"Why—why, it's only—" he commenced. He called a waiter. "Champagne for the three of us. The best in the house." He nodded to a table. "Let's sit down, shall we?"

His voice hurried on, as neither of the two moved: "Tell me, Miss Kay. How much money'd you come in here to win? That seventy-five you got tonight take care of it? Or can I look for you back some other night?"

Kay darted another frantic glance at the clock. Expect her back some other night? In the intoxication of her winning, the hour had passed swiftly. Around about her everything had been a sort of haze of magical enchantment as she had won and lost, and lost and won, but crept steadily, dollar by dollar, ahead. Now Bull's speech brought her up short.

Kay returned to reality in a sort of sick despair. Seventy-five dollars had been, it seemed to her, a fabulous winning for a single night's play. Only it wasn't enough!

Kay stammered. "I—I'm afraid you

won't see me back, Bull. I mean, I'd hoped to win a lot more than seventy-five dollars, but—" Her glance winged to the clock. "I'm afraid I stayed here too long tonight, and that Grandfather won't ever let me—"

Bull Donaldson beamed. The waiter was arriving with the champagne, setting up the iced bucket beside one of the tables. Bull gestured to the white cloth, the polished glasses.

"Then why go home at all tonight?"

Kay's voice was strangled. "What?"

Tom Carey made a leap for Bull Donaldson. Agilely Bull dodged behind the table, held up his hand placatingly.

"Wait, Tom! Wait before you jump to no wild conclusions! You ain't heard me through yet. I got a legitimate business proposition to make to her."

TOM evidently didn't hear. He charged in, upsetting the table. He caught Bull by the throat, and the two of them crashed to the floor. An hombre with the broad shoulders of an ox leaped forward, swinging a blackjack.

Kay screamed, "Wait! Wait, everybody! Tom, let go of him! Don't!"

She flung herself between the man with the blackjack and Tom Carey. With the bouncer and the waiters and everybody closing in, Tom was outnumbered ten to one.

Her heart raced wildly, joyously, at the way he'd reacted to Bull's words. But this wasn't the way to settle it. In a free-for-all Tom would be beaten to a pulp.

Shielding Tom so that the bouncer with the blackjack couldn't hit him, she dropped to Tom's side, tore at the fingers that he was forcing into Bull Donaldson's neck. Let Bull make his "legitimate" proposition. It wasn't going to hurt her to listen, was it? She wasn't one of those helpless little creatures who would swoon if Bull's proposition was, even by the faintest stretch of the imagination, off color! She was strong and she was self-sufficient, and it wasn't going to hurt her in the least to listen to the business deal Bull wanted to propose.

She tore at Tom's hand. "Let him go, Tom!"

She had Tom's wrist in both her hands, now. Her strength wasn't a match for the man's, but there was a vibrant ring of command in her voice. At any rate, Tom relaxed the taut fingers at Bull Donaldson's throat.

Tom got up, backed away. The bouncer halted, tensed and ready. Gasping for breath, Bull Donaldson came to his feet. Two angry eyes transfixed Tom in malevolent fury. Then the eyes rested more gently upon Kay.

Bull said, "Thanks, Miss Kay. And now if you can keep your wild Indian there under control for a couple of minutes. . . ."

Bull ordered the table set up again. He called to the crowd, "Row's over, folks. Step up to the bar. This round's on me."

He looked at Kay. Kay made the opening gesture by sitting down at the table.

Tom stood there stiff and tense. "Okay, Bull—spill it. Only, by hell, it had *better* be legitimate."

Bull poured out three glasses. Kay touched the rim of hers with her lips. "I'm listening, Bull. You said it was a business proposition."

Bull nodded. "Right, ma'am, a business proposition." His voice dropped. "Your bein' here earned me over five thousand dollars tonight, Miss Kay. While you was winnin' your little dollar bets, the gang that had collected round to watch you was plungin'. And I got to thinkin'. Maybe it wasn't such a wild idea lettin' you play, after all. Maybe there was somethin' in it. Not some rouged hussy playin' her friend's chips, but a pretty tanned youngster like you, free-lancin' it. Playin' her own game, like a man. And so what I meant was . . ."

Voice hurrying along, Bull managed to get it all out this time before Tom Carey's face turned purple and his fists again clenched. The gist of Bull's proposition was this: Free-lancing it, Kay might lose

the next time. She was bound to lose in the long run, simply because of the house's inexorable percentage. Bull, on the other hand, had a plan whereby Kay couldn't lose.

She was to work for him as an employee. Not every night, perhaps, but one or two nights a week she'd wander in, play the wheel with the chips that Bull gave her. On the wheel, she'd neither win nor lose; any winning would go back into the cashier's till. But, just for coming in and lending color and glamor to the play, Bull would pay her seventy-five dollars a week.

Bull's voice purred on. "And that's what I meant by, 'Why go home, tonight?' Set down, Tom! If she rolls home tonight, two-three in the mornin' she never comes back' nacherly. Them Puritanical grandparents of hers will see to that. So she's got to leave home."

Tom's hand slid down to his hip.

BULL leaped to his feet, backed away. "Don't shoot me, you fool! She ain't *dancin'* for me! She don't have to sit with the customers! T'ain't like goin' into a honkatonk. She simply gets herself a room at the hotel and lives there respectable."

Tom's voice crackled. "And you know and I know, Bull, what the town would think of her, gettin' herself a room at the Great Western House." Tom's hand came up with the gun. "Legitimate proposition, huh? Why, you—"

Kay sprang to her feet. "Tom!" She whirled in front of his drawn gun, and faced Bull.

What the town would think of her, leaving her grandparents and setting herself up as lady with no visible means of support in the Great Western House, she knew only too well. Only, standing there and weighing it all with the utmost calm, Kay felt no trace of anger at Bull.

Bull hadn't insulted her by assuming that she'd listen to his proposition. Verde City folks had always thought the worst of her, anyway. What did she care what they thought now? All she cared about was the revenge that some day she was going to have on the town. The revenge that she was going to have, first of all, on Jack Ames!

Kay stood there. She had come into the Idle Hour hoping to run ten dollars into enough to take out a preemption claim on six hundred and forty acres of grazing land surrounding one of the Ames' precious waterholes. Now she saw the uncertainty, as Bull pointed out, of trying to get so large a sum by gambling. But in place of that, she was offered the certainty of *earning* it. And if she earned it by tossing her reputation to the winds, by becoming a come-on girl and a lure for Bull's gambling parlors, who cared?

Tom Carey? Kay winced for a second as she thought of poor Tom, with his chivalrous attitude toward women. She guessed Tom was the closest thing to a friend she had ever had. She hated to disillusion and hurt him. But it couldn't be helped.

The scene beside the waterfall in the autumn hills this afternoon flashed across her mind. The red mist of sheer fury again misted Kay's eyes. Jack had taken her for some spineless, pliant little school girl. Well, she'd show him! With good luck and plenty of dry weather, she'd show him before the year was out!

Kay found her voice. "It's a deal, Bull. . . ."

Tom Carey saw her as far as the Great Western House that night. He stood at her side as she checked in without baggage, his lean face a warning that the pale, pimply little night clerk had better talk softly and politely.

Then Tom turned, went out into the night. Thinking what? Kay wondered. Thinking still that there were just two kinds of women, and that she had become the other kind? Or did he understand, perhaps? Life for old Pete Carey's son hadn't been easy, either. Tom, with all the rumors

that circulated about his gun-fighting years in bloody Lincoln County, was just as much of an outcast among the town's respectable gentry as she herself.

It came to Kay that there was a sort of kinship between her and Tom. Maybe he *did* understand. He knew how, all her life, she had been hated and despised and shunned as the daughter of Diamond Bill Cameron. Maybe he realized that she wasn't taking it lying down, that she was fighting back!

CHAPTER THREE

Two Against a County

OCTOBER passed. There at forty-five hundred feet there was a blizzard early in November. But the snow didn't last as it did a hundred miles to the north in the towering Mogollons. It melted after a few days and trickled off. Then it didn't snow again until a brief flurry around Christmas. It looked like a mild open winter, folks said. It'd make easy work for the herders and the punchers.

Nights when Kay went through the sham of gambling with Bull's money in the Idle Hour, she heard the gossip. Nobody was troubled for lack of water yet. But some of the older ranchers were worried. There'd been an open, snowless, rainless winter like this once before, twenty years ago. And the first hot sun of the spring had burned up the range and dried the waterholes.

"Come June, that year, we'd had only a couple of thunder showers. By July there was only two waterholes open between here and Desert Wells—the big pool on Sycamore under the waterfall on the Ames ranch, and Harvey Anderson's drippin' springs. Anderson and Ames both donated water to everybody in the countryside."

Kay tucked away what she heard, filed it in her mind. She drew her seventy-five dollars a week from Bull, and salted it away in the bank. She'll be twenty-one in January, and when she was twenty-one—well, according to the documents which she had sent for and received from Washington, there were two ways you could lay claim to government land. You could homestead it for five years, or you could pay five hundred dollars outright for what was known as a preemption. It was considerably more expensive the latter way—five hundred to the government, on top of the five hundred dollars in improvements that you had to put in on the property all in one year. But it was much quicker. You could prove up in a single year. . . .

In the middle of January, Kay made the stage trip three hundred miles east to the land office at the railhead. She unfolded her government survey map of the country around Verde City, and asked permission to file on six hundred and forty acres of grazing land surrounding the waterfall and the pool below it on Sycamore Creek.

The agent argued with her at first. The land she had in mind was within the fence limits of the great Ames Circle Star; and the government was striving to avoid a repetition of some of the bloody sodbuster-cattleman feuds which had harried western Nebraska and Kansas. In country that had been held any length of time by a legitimate cow outfit, the government was usually tipping the cattleman off that his best move was to preempt the waterholes, himself.

The man said, "Look, Miss Cameron, none of that country 'round Verde City's been filed on at all yet. It's too far from the railhead, too far from the law. The sodbuster and the little two-bit cattleman ain't dared go in there. And we ain't been sending anybody in to be lynched. Why don't you file here, in the Red River Valley near one of the railroad townsites?"

Kay shook her head. The agent painted a picture of possible violence if she insisted upon making a claim inside the Ames fences. He said, "The local law in Verde

City won't protect you, and you know it."

Kay nodded. She knew that, all right. Verde City was a cowtown. The claim-settler and the nester needn't look for help from a sheriff whom the cattle crowd had put in power. But she wasn't turning back now.

Violence? She'd learned about violence this past autumn and winter. Bull had said that she wouldn't have to sit with his customers. And under the ever-watchful eye of Tom Carey, who was always there the nights when Kay gambled, Bull hadn't ever broken his promise. An occasional drunken customer would try to force his attentions upon her, but Tom was there, to take care of that. Twice Tom had had to leap to her assistance as self-delegated unofficial bouncer. Once she, herself, had had to fly into a customer, pommel him and claw him and kick him in the shins.

And there had been violence outside the Ide Hour, too. There had been the pack of hysterically righteous women who had called upon Kay, one day in the Great Western House. They'd forced their way into her room, attacked and beaten her, and given her twenty-four hours to leave the town, under threat of a tar and feathering from their menfolks. . . .

She knew all about violence, Kay guessed. She wasn't afraid. Tom Carey, whatever he thought of her these days, had stuck by her. A vigilante mob, one day, had looked into the muzzles of Tom's guns, and the tar and feathering had never materialized.

And she was depending on Tom now, in this venture of hers to claim the waterfall and the pool on Sycamore Creek. Not that she had told Tom everything, of course. . . .

She wanted to, but she didn't dare. Jack Ames and his pale, pretty, clinging-vine little wife were back in Verde City after their long honeymoon in Europe. Kay hadn't told Tom her real reasons for wanting to preempt the waterhole on the Sycamore for fear—well, for fear that if Tom learned what a cad Jack Ames had been, Tom would take the whole affair into his own hands. He'd back Jack Ames into a corner of the Idle Hour Saloon, crisply order Jack to draw, and sweep for his gun!

No, she wanted her revenge on Jack Ames to be her own personal revenge. She couldn't let Tom Carey completely share her confidence— and the realization of that gave her a lonely heartsick feeling deep down inside.

Kay shook her head for the hundredth time to the well-meaning little government land office clerk. "If that land's legally open to entry, I want to enter it."

IN FEBRUARY of that year Kay staked out her section of grazing land. With the money that Bull Donaldson had been paying her, she bought barbed wire and hired a fence-building crew.

Tom Carey, wearing his twin sixguns, superintended the job. Ames riders came to frighten the workmen away, but they rode off when they saw Tom meant business. Tom was with her that day when South Brothers first refused to sell her lumber for her shack, and then—Ben South's eyes on Tom's sixgun—changed their mind.

The shanty went up. Kay moved into it toward the first of that dry, rainless March.

Jack Ames' lawyer wrote a friendly placating letter in April. Kay was within her legal rights, he had to admit. The Circle Star had decided to respect those rights, but he couldn't vouch for what some of the aroused and indignant neighbors might do. Kay was establishing a dangerous precedent. Other ranchers were worrying about their waterholes, discovering that it might not be possible to homestead them in their own names. The lawyer hinted darkly at trouble. Not from his client, Jack Ames, of course—but from Ames' hot-tempered neighbors, to whom this was an important test case. He suggested that Jack Ames was ready to pay Kay for her improvements, plus a modest profit, if she

would abandon her claim and let the Circle Star file upon it.

Kay wrote back simply that she didn't care to deal with Jack Ames through an intermediary. She showed the letter to Tom. Tom set up a tent out on her claim, and forbade her to go into the Idle Hour her two nights a week.

"You mustn't ride in and out alone," Tom said, "and I can't ride along with you and guard the place here at the same time. Looks like we need some help."

The week following, a couple of lank, lean, flint-countenanced hombres in their battle-scarred, hard-bitten forties got off the stage in Verde City, and rode out to Kay's claim.

"Friends o' mine," Tom said, "goin' to work for you for twenty a month and their keep, Kay." So Kay hired them.

Those two men had fought with Tom in bloody Lincoln County. They were two of the deadliest gunfighters in the whole length and breadth of the frontier. Kay hired them, not realizing that twenty a month was a ridiculous price to pay them. How was she to know that they could have earned a hundred a week anywhere—and that it was a hundred a week, and not friendship for Tom, which had brought them here?

March and April passed. The spring grass started up as usual. The neighborhood streams and springs flowed. Kay had another offer from Jack's lawyer, offering to raise the ante. She didn't answer it.

She came down Main Street in Verde City one day as Jack's pale, fragilely lovely little China doll bride from the East came toward her from the opposite direction. Jack's bride, tilting her nose high in the air and gathering her skirts about her, stepped off the plank sidewalk into the gutter and crossed the street to avoid Kay.

EVERYONE in town cut Kay these days—even the men-folks who had used to gather around her at Bull Donaldson's roulette table. The neighborhood ranchers had found it glamorous and exciting to gamble elbow to elbow with a colorful, free-lance, two-gun Calamity Jane sort of gal who was supporting herself, so it seemed, on her gambling winnings. But it had been one thing for them to condone her living alone at the Great Western House, and it was another thing entirely now. She was no longer a glamour type.

As a claim-nester, out there on the Ames ranch, she was a threat and an ugly menace. If she got away with this legalized steal of one of the Ames waterholes, who knew how many other claim-settlers, emboldened by her example, might come in here?

Kay lost her job at Bull's. "You ain't packin' 'em in any more," Bull explained. "They hate you now."

She never moved a step these days without two criss-crossed guns on her hip, or without an armed bodyguard. Being constantly shadowed irked her at times. But she was prudent and practical enough to see that she needed masculine help. There was a shooting affray along her fence one night, as a half dozen masked riders attacked with wire-cutters. Her guns alone couldn't have driven the six back where they came.

May, with waxed magenta blossoms on the tiny strawberry cactus, came into the hills. Tom asked her one day about stock. She'd built her fences and her shanty, and had the five hundred dollars in the bank to pay the government for her preemption at the end of the year. Only thus far, she hadn't stocked her grazing land with any cattle.

Tom said, "I don't want to horn in on your play, Kay. You thought all this up yourself, goin' to work for Bull, savin' up money enough to make yourself a range princess. But grazin' land alone don't make a cow ranch. And I was wonderin'. Got a little stake of my own, you know. How's for goin' partners on this, Kay?

You've got the land. I'll buy the cattle."

The brown eyes were warm that day. He stumbled huskily, emotionally, over the word, "partners". And for a minute something clutched at Kay's heart. That look in his eyes sent an ecstatic thrill dancing through her veins. He was her partner already—but she mustn't let him guess the truth that lay buried in her lonely heart. Her fierce little will hardened on its single purpose.

Ranching six hundred and forty acres with Tom as her partner wasn't her goal. There'd be no revenue on Jack Ames or upon the neighborhood by going into a tiny, two-bit partnership with a one-time professional gunfighter whose antecedents were as shady as her own. And until that revenge was accomplished, there was no room in Kay's heart for softer emotion. Kay shook her head.

"The cattle end of it'll come in due time, Tom. Right now, I'm simply . . ." She ended with a shrug.

Right now she was simply waiting. She was waiting for the sun, which daily blazed down out of its polished, cloudless, turquoise sky, to dry up the surrounding waterholes. She was waiting for the day when Jack Ames must come to her and let her dictate the terms!

CHAPTER FOUR

When Love Comes Too Late

THE thermometer read a hundred and ten in the shade for three successive weeks during June and July. The grass burned and the streams and springs dried up. Sycamore Creek, beside Kay's cabin, shrank to the merest dribble. Only a tiny white plume of spray, feeding out of the sandy creek bed, went over the waterfall. What water fell into the long deep pool below the falls didn't flow out. Below the rocky pool, Sycamore Creek was dry.

The Circle Star and the neighboring ranches shipped what stock they could East to an early market, trail-herded other gaunt herds north into the Mogollons.

Jack Ames called at last upon Kay in person. The shifty blue eyes met hers. "All right, Kay," he said. "My men ain't a match for this crew of hired gunfighters you've kept adding to in the past few weeks. What are your terms?"

Kay sat there, cool and calm, the deadly rage filling her heart. Once she could have been mistress of the Circle Star in its entirety. Now—well, now, she was letting him off easy. She'd tossed her reputation to the winds. She'd endured insults and violence and the malevolent fury of her neighbors. Considering what she had sacrificed, in order to face him today, she shouldn't show him the tiniest iota of mercy. Yet she did. . . .

She told him, "I want a half interest in the Circle Star, Jack. A partnership. You understand? It isn't to be the Ames ranch any more. It's to be the Ames & Cameron Land and Cattle Company."

He was married. She couldn't have him as a husband now, nor did she want him as a husband. But she could still have what she had wanted so desperately last summer when for a while he'd offered her the hope of being mistress of the Circle Star. She could be his equal partner. His wife would have to accept her, entertain her. And as for those women in town who had invaded her room in the Great Western House that day—Mrs. Ellis, the banker's wife; Lawyer Amory's wife; Mrs. Combs of the Beehive—they'd have to bow down to her, too!

Holding the whiphand in the management of the Ames & Cameron Land Cattle Company, she could take the company's funds out of Banker Ellis's bank unless the man's wife toed the line. She could give the company's legal business to a firm in Santa Fe. She could insist that supplies and replacements be bought in Albuquer-

que. Subjugating Jack Ames, she could subjugate each and every one of the rest of them!

She went on slowly, "You'll bankrupt yourself if you go on selling on a glutted market, or shipping herds north and paying pasture. On the other hand, you've got enough stored hay here to see you through—if you had water."

She watched him standing there, face livid. She knew what he was thinking. All that winter she had lived alone at the Great Western House. Did he have to take a woman like that into partnership with him? A woman who had lived alone out here in her claim shanty, surrounded by the flotsam and jetsam of the range, the scum of the frontier-town gutters?

Kay watched his face constrict in horror. She was no longer the pliant little bit of vital loveliness that she'd been those months when she had made him forget his engagement to a girl back home. She was a tigress today—hateful, wicked, evil.

"A—a half interest in the Circle Star?" he stammered. "But good Lord, Kay, the Circle Star's worth—"

Kay shrugged.

The man drew himself up. "And you can go to hell before I agree!" He whirled, stalked out.

Kay sat there, calm and quiet. This was July, she told herself. Let him walk out today. Let him gamble. Maybe there'd be rain. Maybe his springs wouldn't dry up entirely. Maybe his dried-up tanks would fill. He'd try waiting until August.

She was willing to gamble, too. The loss of her job at Bull Donaldson's had put a serious crimp in her finances. She might have to spend all her five hundred dollars' preemption money on her hired gunhands, whose twenty a month apiece amounted to considerable in the aggregate. If it rained, she might face defeat herself. But what was it she had heard her father say, once, long, long in the past?

"Raise or drop—never call. If you've got a man licked, raise him. Play it out to the last white chip."

THERE was an attack on Kay's fences that night. Her crew of gunfighters, which she had had Tom Carey increase in the past few weeks to eight, stood off thirty to forty men on two fronts. Shots rent the air.

And over and above the sound of the gunfire, there came the endless plaintive bawling of thirsty Circle Star cattle along the fence. Their own waterholes were coffee-colored filth. And, across a half mile of Kay's burned pastures, they could smell the sweetness of the spray-filled air about the waterfall.

Kay ministered to two wounded men that night. There in the lamplight as her fingers nimbly fashioned the bandages, Tom Carey looked at her long and steadily, and said nothing. Tom's usually ruddy face was strained, gaunt. There was a puzzled probing glint in his dark eyes.

Kay didn't like it. There had been an unsentimental closeness and kinship between them all fall and all winter and all spring. Tom had his conventions. There were good women and there were bad, and there were things that good women didn't do. Yet for all his conventions, for all his frequently voiced, "What in hell kind of a game are you up to, Kay?" he'd stood loyally by her. But now, Kay didn't know.

Lips tight shut, Tom said nothing. He sat there oiling and cleaning his gun. He gave no sign. But for the moment, somehow, Kay had the uncomfortable feeling that they were suddenly less close.

Was he brooding over her refusal to make him her partner? Suddenly generous warmth filled her heart. One of these days she'd offer Tom something a thousand times better than a partnership in a tiny, two-bit, six hundred and forty acre ranch. She'd make him business manager of the Ames & Cameron Land and Cattle Company. The neighborhood would have to

respect the son of old reprobate Pete Carey, too! She looked at him anxiously, desperately.

August came, with days as burning as July's. Shopping in town one day, Kay overheard a wisp of gossip. It seemed there was a rift of some sort between Jack Ames and his bride. The drought, the prospect of bankruptcy had worn their nerves thin. They had quarreled publicly in the Great Western House dining room. Jack had slapped his wife's face. And Tom Carey, eating at another table, so it was said, had leaped to his feet, waded into Jack, poled him with a single blow, and offered Jack's bride his arm. . . .

There in the Beehive that day, Kay froze without quite knowing why. Tom had gone to the rescue of Jack Ames' bride? Tom hadn't mentioned it to her. Kay trembled, roused herself. Of course Tom had gone to the defense of Jack's bride. Just as he would have gone to the defense of any woman. She was proud of him! Jealous? That was absurd!

She fought down the panicky feeling within her; felt it rise again, in spite of herself. The incident had happened a whole week before, Kay gathered. And oh, she'd commenced to observe Tom's coolness even longer ago than a week. Tom's coolness and his rescuing Beth Ames weren't related. They couldn't be! Or were they?

Into Kay's mind there flashed the picture of Jack Ames' pretty, fragile, China doll wife. For a cold moment, Kay stood there thinking of Tom, trying to put herself in his shoes and envision through his eyes his ideal of womanhood. What sort of girl did he dream of? What sort of girl did any man dream of? The kind that wore dungarees and criss-crossed gun-belts, like a man? The kind that had gambled all winter in Bull Donaldson's, without a thought of her reputation? Or the pale, pretty, clinging-vine like Beth?

Strangely, Kay was shaken and trembling when she abruptly left the Beehive, with her armed bodyguard at her heels. Whatever else it was she wanted to buy, she couldn't remember.

She started home at a lope. Trembling uncertainty filled her. How should she talk it over with Tom when she found him? Could she tell him why she'd cast herself in this role of roughness all year? "Jack treated me like a cad, Tom, and so I . . ."

Or was it too late to tell him that? If she told him now what a cad Jack was, it might merely make him feel all the more chivalrous toward Beth. Kay didn't know. She knew simply and suddenly that she mustn't lose Tom. Nothing she had done thus far would have been possible without him. Nothing, she realized bleakly, would be possible in the future without him. And if he were drawing away from her now, toward a woman more nearly in keeping with his ideals, somehow she must call him back.

The miles blurred past. Kay fought down the thought again. Valiantly she tried to pull herself together. She was behaving like a silly school girl. She was being one of those impossible jealous women whom she hated. Tom wasn't drawing away from her toward Beth Ames. Tom loved her! And she . . .

Well, she guessed she'd deliberately blinded herself to it until now. She'd filled her heart, to the exclusion of everything else, with her hatred of Jack Ames. There hadn't been room there in her heart for any other feeling. But there was room now! She loved Tom!

And Tom had begun to draw away from her because she'd hidden that love from him. Because he'd commenced, hopelessly, to doubt whether it existed. Because he was hurt and wounded, and needed reassurance from her. She'd give him that reassurance now! She'd show him that wasn't all unapproachable, rock-like hardness! She'd say, "Tom, I've been a blind, silly fool. I love you, Tom. . . ."

Suddenly she jerked in her pony. She

had come to the brink of the twisting zigzag trail leading down into Sycamore's dry lower canyon. And now, from the brink of the canyon wall, she could see two dismounted figures on the lower trail. Their ponies grazed nearby. A man and a girl were sitting on a log. The girl had her head on the man's shoulder. The man had his arm about her. . . . The man was Tom Carey, and the girl was Beth Ames.

CHAPTER FIVE

Stampede to Love

THE little moment went on and on. Kay held her pony in on a tight curb, hand so clenched on the reins that her knuckles shone white through the tan.

Down there in the canyon, the two seated figures got up. Tom helped Beth Ames into the saddle of her horse. Beth rode off in one direction. Tom followed her with his eyes. Then he mounted and started very slowly up Sycamore Creek toward Kay's claim. After an eternity, Kay pointed her pony down the zigzag trail toward home. She made no move to overtake Tom.

She waited until they met in the little cabin yard, until her flint-faced, battle-scarred bodyguard was no longer with her to eavesdrop. Then she stepped up to him.

There might have been ways of leading up to it slowly. Only she had to find out immediately. Standing there, frozen and cold, Kay let him have it with both barrels.

"I wasn't spying on you, Tom. Only I happened to come along the trail close enough to see . . ."

Tom whirled on her. And it wasn't just aloofness that Kay read in his blazing eyes now. He wasn't drifting imperceptibly away from her. He'd drifted all the way. The dark eyes blazed with wrath.

"Right, Kay. I happened to run into Mrs. Ames. And you saw me with my arm around her, tryin' to comfort her. Poor kid! You know what you've done to her? You have busted up her marriage!"

"What?"

Tom's voice mounted. "She ain't hard and callous like you, Kay—or like her husband. This spectacle of cattle dyin' of thirst while you and Jack fight it out to a stalemate has made a wreck out of her. She can't stand it. She's pleaded with Jack to give in to you."

Kay's heart leaped; then the fire ebbed out of her as Tom's voice went on.

"Only Jack's as stubborn and cold-blooded and hard as you, Kay. Sooner'n accept your preposterous terms, he's going to let those cattle die. He's as callous to their sufferin' as you. Sure, I was comfortin' her, Kay. She's a stranger out here, miles from home, without a real friend she can turn to."

He whirled, stalked off to the hitching rail, where his pony stood, reins dragging. He swung up into the saddle and rode out the lane without looking back. . . .

Kay stood there for a long second, utterly numb. The landscape faded, grew misty around about her. Only it wasn't anger or fury that filmed her eyes today. She didn't feel the fierce savagery which she had felt a year ago when Jack had left her. She felt nothing, she guessed. There was nothing to feel. There was nothing left in her life any longer.

It came to her that, all fall and all winter and all spring, she'd held happiness in the palm of her hand. Tom could have been hers any time that she had wanted him. She'd remembered the time he had asked her so huskily, "Can't we be partners, Kay?" Partners they could have been, joint owners of their claim here. And who cared how tiny and unimportant that claim was? They could have been happy, she and Tom.

The summer drought would have come. There'd have been water here, not only for their own herds, but for those skeleton herds of Jack Ames which he'd found it too costly to ship. They'd have shared their

water. And their neighbors would have accepted them.

Belatedly it came to Kay that this, perhaps, would have been her subtlest revenge of all upon the people who had slandered and hated her—to show them how kind and merciful and generous she could be.

Kay felt the numbness gradually leave her. In its place came sharp pain. What had she done with this happiness which she had held in her hand? Why, with stubborn blind hate in her heart, she'd thrown it away! To accomplish what? Simply this! Jack's marriage probably wouldn't have lasted, anyway. Any bride of Jack's sooner or later, would have discovered the weakness and cowardice in him. But she'd caused the blow-up at a time when Tom was turning away from *her,* in horror at her inhuman cruelty. She'd sent Beth, not back East, but straight into the comforting arms of Tom Carey!

From across her pasture land, Kay heard the low plaintive bawling of the thirst-crazed Circle Star herds at her fence. Slowly she turned, walked down to the saddle shed, slipped something into her jeans pockets.

It was too late now, she knew, to call Tom back. Tom was in love with Beth, with a pretty little China doll. Beth might lack character in some ways. Still, there was feminine tenderness in Beth's heart. She had character enough to suffer at the spectacle of poor, dumb, innocent cattle dying of thirst.

Kay came out of the saddle shed, swung up astride a pony. They'd be happy, she hoped—Tom and the pretty, tender-hearted little woman who was his ideal.

Kay spurred her pony to a gallop. The half mile of pastureland blurred past. She reached her fence and the little knot of hired gunfighters who were guarding it.

"Somethin' happenin' over there, ma'am," one of her men informed her. "Gang o' riders tryin' to round up them critters and—"

Kay paid no heed. Hand plunging into her pocket for the tool she'd brought with her from the saddle shed, she rode close to the triple strands of taut wire. She swung down from her saddle. Standing there beside a post, Kay took the wirecutters, clipped the top strand.

There was a shout of warning from the little group of gunfighters. "Ma'am—don't! If you cut that wire—"

Kay paid no heed.

The top strand snapped and recoiled. Wild recklessness filling her, Kay dropped the wire-cutter to the second strand.

THIS was the end, she knew—the end of her hopes for an Ames & Cameron Land and Cattle Company, the anti-climax to her sacrifices of the past year. But now she saw how base and petty those hopes and dreams of the past year had been. She saw the emptiness of her revenge, even had she accomplished it.

The second strand snapped and whipped back like a hissing snake. Kay never got to the bottom strand. For the stampede had already started!

Leaping over the bottom strand, the thirst-crazed herd commenced its wild berserk charge. Kay heard the sound of horses' hoofs. Her hired gunfighters were high-tailing it, deserting her as they fled for their lives.

She heard a man's frenzied shout. "Kay—run! Up the fence!" And for an eerie second, it sounded like Tom's voice—Tom's voice, from the Circle Star side of the fence, frenzied with terror-stricken anguish. "Kay!"

Kay couldn't be sure, for a hundred things seemed to be happening at once. Standing there beside the post, she tried to leap back behind the protection of the unbroken section of the fence. The standing fence would protect her. The cattle would spread out fanwise as they came through the gap. She'd be standing safely within the angle of the spreading fan and the

standing fence. She'd be off to one side of the stampede.

Then something happened, even as it occurred to her that it could happen. The stampeding herd hit the fence post like an avalanche. The cedar post snapped off. The whole section of fence came down. Leaping away from the whipping strands, Kay dodged back from the tangle of wire. But the stampeding herd was starting through the new gap—and she was trapped in its path.

Kay whirled, with a split second advantage. The first of the cattle to leap through the new gap were tripping in the tangled wire. The stampede at that point was being held up for a hair-triggered instant. It would take a second, maybe two, for the steers behind to stumble and fight their way over the fallen animals' bodies. Kay had a head start of ten yards. Praying, she ran.

She heard a pounding roar behind her. Thundering hoofs bore down upon her. Something struck her. It was a blur. Yet the shadow at her side seemed to be a horse's shadow. And the something that had seemed to strike her was a man's arm which swooped down and lifted her.

Suddenly she sat in Tom Carey's lap in the saddle, facing him. She was looking into his face, strained and desperate. She stared wildly back over his shoulder, into the van of the stampeding herd just behind. They were riding for their lives. . . .

All of a sudden, it was over. They'd pulled to one side of the herd, and it was sweeping past them in a bee-line for the pool below the waterfall. Tom was jerking in his pony. He had his arms about her and was crushing her in them. He was kissing her and scolding her.

"You danged little fool, Kay! Didn't you realize what would happen? Oh, Kay, Kay darling, I love you so! Promise me you won't ever frighten me like that again. Promise me. . . ." He swung her gently down onto the ground. He vaulted out of his saddle down beside her. "Kay, honey—look at me! Promise me. . . ."

And there in the safety of those arms, Kay stared up at him. He loved her!

* * *

They sat there, Kay Cameron and Tom Carey, on the stoop of Kay's claim shanty, in the golden light of the sunset. The last of Kay's hired gunfighters had departed. Circle Star punchers, riding through the fence on the heels of the stampede, had finally wrought order out of the chaos.

Kay looked up at Tom. And even as she asked it, she knew how foolish and unnecessary it was to ask. "B-but Beth Ames, Tom?"

Tom looked down at her. He said, "I felt sorry for Beth, Kay. Same as I felt sorry for that thirsty herd of cattle. I—I was simply promisin' her that those cattle wouldn't suffer any more. And I was makin' good on that promise when you come out to the wire. I'd just been to Jack Ames. I bought the herd from him, and was gettin' his men to help me drive it round the fence to your gate. . . ."

She felt Tom look at her hard and steadily. "Figured you wouldn't object, Kay," he said. "Figured that when you saw those poor thirsty critters come through the gate toward the waterhole . . ." The dark eyes were dreamy. "Maybe it wasn't the goal you were fighting for, but I couldn't believe the woman I loved was really hard and cruel, Kay. I bought those cattle for the cattle's sake, and for Beth's sake, but most of all I bought 'em for *your* sake. I loved you, and I wanted to prove to myself I wasn't an idiot for lovin' you. . . ."

His voice trailed off. Kay felt his arms about her again. There was still the uncaught threads of a hundred problems still to be solved, to be sure. Beth might still leave Jack. The neighborhood might still hate Kay.

Kay didn't know. She knew simply she had Tom. It was enough. ♥ ♥ ♥

Why, oh *why*, she wondered, couldn't he reach through those bars and draw her close?

By Theodore J. Roemer

Her Kind of Hombre

What can a girl do with a man who won't fight, won't kiss—and won't budge out of her dreams?

THE glow of the westering sun possibly had the same degree of brightness as Sue Morley's youthful brown eyes, but it certainly had immeasurably less softness. Sue was standing on the

rear stoop of Reevers' combined hardware and postoffice, watching a distant figure ride slowly and awkwardly out of the hazy west and approach the town.

The figure, she knew, was Dan Reevers. He was riding Prince, the gentlest horse Bill Parks at the livery stable had had to sell. Dan was an Easterner, or had been. Now after eight months, the new owner of the hardware—which Sue had sold to Dan for five thousand dollars—could swing on a horse without falling off the other side. He had developed a deep coat of tan, and his boyish grin had become something straight and manly in meeting Rockton folk. Gangly Dan Reevers, Sue decided, had become quite somebody in Rockton. And also somebody quite lovable, although he didn't realize that. At times he could be so blind. . . .

The clock in the post office struck five. Sue gave her brown hair a swift pat and glanced once at the attractive display of blue kitchen crockery she'd unpacked and put on the shelves. Then humming softly, she hurried into the post office enclosure to make up the mail pouch for the stage-coach's return to Green Springs. The coach would be in any minute now with the evening mail. Already outside a crowd was gathering.

As her swift, young fingers tied up the outgoing mine mail, she briefly wondered if Dan had succeeded in selling the Rawson brothers that windmill. She hoped so. It was a long ride around those Red Buttes, and then, too, they could use the business. *They?* There she went again. And in the shadowy enclosure of the post office a delicate flush crept up her slender neck and blossomed into her young cheeks.

Sue was nineteen. When her father had died last year, she had put her father's business up for sale. She had wanted to rid herself of rough, tough Rockton, of the swarms of love-sick, panting young cowboys—yes, even of the so-correct and handsome young mine superintendent, Tom Kane. He didn't fight or swear or drink, and he had a good job and tended to business, but at that last school dance she'd found out the trim and ultra-polite "Lacy" Kane, as some called him in private, was just as big a wolf as the roughest young cowboy at a barn dance. She had slapped his face, and then had had to run. She had walked home alone that night, mad enough to scratch out Lacy Kane's handsome blue eyes.

Dan Reevers wasn't that way. She closed the mail pouch and sighed, her shirt front moving rhythmically. She wished he'd try to kiss her—just once, to see how it felt. Or maybe she was fooling herself. Maybe this warmth she felt in her cheeks was not what she thought. . . .

A roar of hoofs swept down from the north, and she knew the stage was in. Then she heard Pa Bellows, the driver, shouting something at the top of his voice. Other cries arose, and Sue's heart skipped three beats. They were shouting holdup! She ran outside.

Pa Bellows' horses were frothy with lather. A score of men swirled about the coach. Sheriff Dewey Thomas was coming running up the middle of the dusty street from his office, his gun banging at his side, his black mustaches streaming.

"Yep, Thomas," Pa Bellows shouted. "Held up the other side of Dog Den Buttes. One gent. A cool number. Had a forty-five at my head at that cutbank east of the creek."

"What'd he take? What'd he want?" Thomas yelled up, and at the same instant Sue's heart grew still with fear. The mine payroll! It was coming today!

"Hell, I dunno," Bellows said. "He jest grabbed the mail pouch an lit off. Scared my horses fust. I grabbed the reins. I didn't even see his cayuse. He had a red bandanna around his jaw, another over his head. He wore old pants and a shirt. They was covered with red rust. That was all I could see."

SUE pushed forward. "Where is the pouch? It's got—" She bit her tongue. That was post office information. "Where is it now?"

Pa Bellows spat a long chew. "Sue, girl, I reckon it's ripped open somewhere in them Red Buttes back of Dog Den. Why, shucks, nothin's lost but a parcel o' gossipy letters, ain't it?"

Sue felt herself pale. This was the first of the month; the mine payroll was due today. She gulped and tired to nod, and then Sheriff Thomas had her gently by the arm.

"The payroll, Sue?" He whispered it.

She nodded. "It's due today. No one is supposed to know about it. This—this never happened before." She felt like crying, although it wasn't her money. She felt somehow as if she had failed, which was a silly thought, for she just worked in the post office which was to receive the registered packet.

"What's up, Thomas?" a hard, quick voice spoke from the edge of the crowd. She turned and saw Lacy Kane dismounting from his sleek, fresh bay mare. He had on pressed riding breeches and a fine tan shirt, also nicely pressed. His blond hair was short and crisp and the little mustache on his upper lip was short and crisp, too.

Tersely, big Dewey Thomas told what had happened, and Lacy Kane's blue eyes pulled down tight and sharp. He gave one glance at Sue, standing motionless and rigid. Then, after questioning Pa Bellows briefly, he said:

"May I see you a moment, Sheriff? Alone."

Pa Bellows hauled in the lesser sacks of mail and Sue led the way into the building, where she numbly began sorting out the third and fourth class matter. She wondered where Dan was. He should be unsaddled now, washed up, and in here to help her as usual. She wondered at the crawling fear in her throat. Something was wrong. *What was it?* Her fingers flew, sorting mail.

Then she heard angry voices through the open side door. "There's your man, Sheriff. Arrest him . . . The evidence is plain as that dust on his saddle blanket . . . His business is running down hill; he needs the money, and he knew the payroll was coming in. . . ."

Sue dropped the mail and ran out the side door. At the rear of the store stood Lacy Kane, Sheriff Thomas and Dan. Dan looked slightly bewildered. His mild gray eyes looked from one man to another; his dusty black hat was shoved back on his dark tousled hair; he frowned and tried to grin. Then he saw Sue.

"Somebody lifted the payroll, Sue, and Tom Kane blames it on me."

His gangly innocence made Sue's heart turn over. She turned quickly to Dewey Thomas.

"No, Sheriff. Dan couldn't. He doesn't even own a gun. He's never shot one in his life!"

Sheriff Thomas went over and ran a beefy hand over the big stock saddle hanging on the shed peg. It came away heavy with red dust. He held out his hand silently and showed it to Sue. Sue's small hands flew to her throat. Her heart was shaking. She wanted to cry out to Dan to shout a denial, but all he did was stand there with his homely face slightly troubled but half smiling, uncertain.

"I'm sorry, Sue," Thomas said, "but Kane is swearing out a warrant for Reevers' arrest. There's nothing I can do but take him in on the circumstantial evidence."

She whirled to Lacy Kane. "You—you've been trying to ruin Dan's business ever since I sold out to him. You've taken the mine purchases away from his store. You've threatened your employees with dismissal if they bought things down here. You're a lowdown scheming skunk!"

Tom Kane flecked a bit of dust from his shirt, but a tinge of red had crept up from

his broad neck into his square, haughty face. "Now why should I do such silly things, Miss Morley?" he drawled.

"Why?" Sue filled her lungs with air, then released it. "You know darn well why, Mister Lacy Kane, if you can remember back to that school dance. You and your fine manners—huh!"

Dan Reevers said, "Sue, did Kane *hurt* you?"

"Besides," Sue went on, wheeling to face the sheriff, "Dan *couldn't* have held up that stage. Pa Bellows said the man wore overalls and an old shirt."

"Dan could have changed clothes easily," Kane said smoothly.

Sue stamped her foot. "Will you please keep your mouth shut? Sheriff, Dan has proof where he was. Dog Den Buttes and Red Buttes are close together, but he was at the Rawson brothers' ranch trying to sell them a windmill."

Tom Kane smoothed his short crisp mustache with a ringed forefinger. "Joe and Russ Rawson weren't home. They're working at the mine. Began yesterday. He has no proof, Sheriff, and if a jury doesn't convict him, I'll sure miss my guess."

He ran meaning fingers over his right cheek where Sue had slapped him that night many months ago; then with an ugly laugh toward her, he turned and walked away.

SHERIFF THOMAS sighed and took hold of Dan's arm. Sue swallowed with effort. "Sheriff, do you have to?"

"I reckon it's my duty, Miss Sue." He saw the tears well up into her eyes. Dan Reevers didn't seem to see them. He said:

"Shucks, this is all a joke. Sure I'll go with you, Sheriff. I ain't got no proof, but I was out to the Rawson's. Darn I sure wish they'd have been home. I'd have liked to sell that windmill."

Sue stood and watched them walk down the street, the tall young man inches above the stocky sheriff, and she saw everybody gawking, and then something let loose inside her chest. The big, innocent, blind kid! He was being railroaded to jail, and didn't realize it. She turned, her eyes filled with tears, and ran into the post office.

It was funny how your world can change so swiftly. One moment the sun is glorious and bright, setting measuredly into the horizon; the next hour grayness is over all the world and coldness is fastened around your heart. You are alone and afraid, and you don't know which way to turn.

She sat on the rear stoop of the hardware, which she'd locked for the day, and wished her father was still alive. He'd know what to do. He'd help her. He'd been cross and angry sometimes when she'd stayed out late at night at barn dances, or boys would come and sit on the porch-swing with her until the moon dropped down behind the Bear Paw Mountains, and their saddle mounts would tromp down all the grass and his pet geraniums. But always when she really needed help, her dad had been there to back her. He'd wanted a boy but had settled for a girl, and he'd raised his daughter knowing what a pretty girl meant to a town of men such as Rockton was. He'd been mighty understanding with her.

Now she remembered his swift-fading wrath when he caught cowboys kissing her, and she wondered what he'd think of Dan. Dan had never kissed her, had never tried. Would her father like that? He'd always said a fighter is the one who'll get somewhere. Dan was no fighter. She bit her lip at the crucifying thought. And he was certainly no Romeo. A dozen times the past months she'd given him opportunities, practically invited him to kiss, but he went on as if he hadn't seen anything.

Once she'd even left the top button on her blouse conspicuously open, and then had climbed a step ladder to hang a new shipment of lanterns on the ceiling hooks; and when he'd come past underneath, she'd purposely rocked the ladder and gave out a small frightened cry. He'd caught her

all right—and had let her go the instant he'd put her on her feet. He hadn't noticed the hint of cologne she'd scented her hair with, or the quite revealing neckline.

One thing she'd been surprised at was the strength of his long arms. He'd held her light as a feather for that one split instant, and all the chills and quivering delights she had ever thought a man could give her by his mere touch had exploded through her veins. She'd stood breathless, swaying. She'd had the back of her hand to her forehead, the other clutching his flexed biceps. She'd looked up at him and she'd given a small, happy laugh. But he'd put her clinging hand upon a strong shelf support and gone quickly to the water bucket for a tin dipper of water for her. She came up straight, and when he returned he didn't say anything to her. And she didn't either to him, but when his back was turned, she quickly buttoned her blouse, red-cheeked. How could a man be so blind?

Now she sat on the stoop in the grayness and wondered what she could do. Her dad had been a fighter; she'd be one too. But what *could* she do, in the face of Dan's helplessness?

She looked down the lonesome street of Rockton. Up the hill the mine lights were winking. Some saloons were lighting up. A dog crossed in the evening twilight. Suddenly she arose, brushed off her jeans and walked down the board walk toward the jail.

PROBABLY Sheriff Thomas would have let her go back into the jail to see Dan, but she didn't feel like asking him. Instead she stopped at the jail window and tapped on the bars. Dan was lying on the straw cot, rolling a smoke as he'd learned since coming to Rockton. He jumped up and hurried over, smiling.

He took her hands between the bars. "Why, Sue. You're cold as ice."

She clutched his strong, lean hands." Dan, we've got to get you out of here. Get you out and find some way to prove your innocence!"

"Shucks, a jury will laugh at Tom Kane's charges. I studied law a couple of years myself."

"You don't know the power Tom Kane is in these parts, where families' bread and butter depend upon his say-so. He hates you, Dan."

"Me? Why?" Incredulity widened Dan's gray eyes.

She bit her lip and forced herself to say it. "Because of me, that's why. He—well, one night I told him I wouldn't marry him if he were the last man in the world."

"But you say he hates *me!*"

She closed her eyes. How could a man be so dumb about things? She spoke in very even tones.

"Listen, when you first came here, I was going out with a dozen different boys, dancing, having fun. Then Dad died and you took up my offer and bought the hardware store. I promised to stay and help you learn the trade and teach you to run the post office, although I wanted to go to Green Springs and work for Mr. Beecher in the post office there at a steady job. As the months went by I kept on staying and staying and not going out and—and now can't you see?"

"You shouldn't work so hard, Sue. "I'll double your wages."

She sighed and gave up. It was just no use!

"No, you can't even make ends meet now, not with Tom Kane bucking you. And you still owe two thousand on the business, which I'm willing to knock off—"

"I'll pay you every cent with interest."

"Oh, hang it all, Dan, you'd promise the world with a fence around it, if you could. You're too danged easy-going and gullible. You've got to fight! Now, I've figured out there were four people who knew that payroll was coming tonight: you, myself, Postmaster Beecher at Green Springs—and Tom Kane. I know I didn't hold up that

stage; I know you didn't; I know old Mr. Beecher didn't; but I don't know Lacy Kane didn't. Now what do you think?"

She saw him frown in the yellow lantern light. Then he said, "Do you think Kane would go so far?"

"I know Tom Kane would. I know his pride."

"But he was all dressed up; his horse was fresh."

"He could have changed swiftly, just as he accused you."

"But to steal his own mine's payroll—"

She took a deep breath. "Dan, if you had more savvy about women, you'd maybe see how deeply Tom Kane hates you because of me. Now I'm going to talk to Sheriff Thomas. I think he'll let you out of here if you put up your store for bond. Will you do that?"

"Why, of course. And—thanks Sue, for coming and doing this for me." He patted her hand through the cell bars.

She withdrew it slowly and reluctantly. She liked his touch—but why, oh *why,* couldn't he reach through those bars of iron and close those big hands around her and draw her close? They could kiss through those bars. They could feel each other's warmth between those cold strips of metal. He could whisper sweet somethings in her hair, just as other men had done momentarily when she'd let them. But no, Dan wouldn't. His boyish mouth would only grin. His gray eyes could smile only like a brother. He would only pat her hand and say in his friendly, casual way, *Thanks, Sue for coming and doing this for me.*

She turned and ran away from the jail, fighting back angry and frustrated tears. Maybe he wasn't worth fighting for. He wouldn't fight for anybody, not even himself!

THE next day Judge Henderson allowed Dan to post his store as bond, and Sheriff Thomas set him free. Sue engineered everything. And back in the post office in the days that followed, she handled a score of investigators, from post office inspectors down to mine detectives, and she ran the hardware, and she kept Dan out trying to sell machinery and windmills and wagons, anything big to make large profits and keep the Reevers' hardware store solvent. Her father and mother had made a good thing of this store; it could still be a big money-maker. Though of course, her parents hadn't had a powerful man like Tom Kane bucking them.

But most of all Sue pondered how she could clear Dan of that holdup charge. That Tom Kane had cleverly engineered it, even to the fact of hiring the Rawson brothers the day before somebody had tipped Dan off that they wanted to buy a windmill, Sue was thoroughly convinced. Where had Kane hidden the money? If she could only search his office, or his room at the hotel. Or maybe he'd hidden it out in the buttes. Still there must be some way to trick Lacy Kane. But how?

Sue racked her pretty head and couldn't find the answer. Then one day Sheriff Thomas said "You're getting thin worrying. Reevers is right. When jury time comes they won't make the charge stick—everything's too circumstantial."

Even Dan noted she wasn't her old vivacious self, which almost surprised her.

"Sue," he drawled, "you're—uh—getting thin. I mean your jeans still fit fine like they always do, but—shucks, I mean you look peaked and worried."

In astonishment she looked up from the postal bulletin that she'd been studying. It was the first time he'd ever noticed her clothes, at least out loud. It would have made her heart beat joyously ordinarily, but at that moment she'd just read something that had given her an idea. Sheriff Thomas, Judge Henderson, and all the people of this town said Sue Morley was a mighty smart gal; now she had a chance to prove it. She'd match her wits with crafty Tom Kane and the power of his mine.

"Dan," she said. "Day after tomorrow the mine is shipping in another payroll by registered mail. I want you to go out to Rawsons' again and try to sell them a windmill. I heard Joe Rawson's quit at the mine and is back home again."

For a moment she saw him hesitate; then came the off-hand shrug. "Dawgone, Sue, I don't think it's worth all that long, hot ride, but I'm willing to give it a try."

Her heart screamed at his indifference. Oh, if he were only a fighting man.

Sighing, she bent and wrote a letter to Mr. Beecher, postmaster at Green Springs, which was to be a part of her plan.

That evening, instead of tidying up her house, putting out the geraniums and watering them, she threw a light cloak about her slim shoulders and walked uptown. Some of the boys she'd dated saw her and tried to stop and talk to her, but she laughed them off with their promises of treats and a ride to Farrels where there was a barn dance that night. Instead, she stopped at the hotel beauty shop and had a hair curl. During it, she enjoyed the latest gossip and laughingly mentioned that Dan was riding to the Rawsons' again in two days to try to sell Joe Rawson a mill. Gladys Coffin, the girl who operated the shop, listened in silence. Gladys, Sue knew, was wildly in love with Tom Kane, and Gladys hated her.

After the beauty shop visit, Sue walked to Judge Henderson's home. The judge put up a protest.

"But, Sue, Rawson's is a mighty long ride for an old man."

"Not for you, Judge," Sue laughed. Judge Henderson had been her father's best friend. "I'll tell you later why I'm asking you to go. Just be sure to be there between two and four that afternoon."

"I'll do my best, Sue, for a certain young lady and a man I know she's interested in."

She gave his white goatee a tug and left laughing.

That night she hugged her pillow and said a little prayer that her scheme would work. That Tom Kane would fall for it, she didn't have too many doubts, but the clincher, the thing to *prove* he was the man committing the holdups—could she make that stick?

She hugged her pillow again and wondered if every girl felt like this and would do such things for the man she loved, even if he didn't show any sign of love for her, or even notice her feminine charms. She sighed and fell asleep.

Two days later Sue listened for the sound of the stagecoach driving in from the north trail. Events had repeated themselves; the coach came roaring in with Pa Bellows mad as a branded steer. This time the holdup gent not only had scared his horses, but shot his new sombrero full of holes.

At once through all the hub-bub, the cry went up, "Where's Reevers? Where's that long drink of water?"

Sheriff Thomas spotted him coming up Saddler's Gulch to the west. With him was Judge Henderson, leaning weakly in the saddle, both on the same horse.

Sue caught her breath, but it was Dan's drawled words that told her that her well-laid plans had gone awry.

"I found the judge on my way back from Rawson's. Guess his horse pitched him and he lay there most the day in Saddler's Gulch." He turned with a tired shrug to Sue. "Joe wasn't home, Sue. Nobody was there again." Then he saw Pa Bellows and the frothy horses, and the look in Sheriff Thomas's craggy eye. "Oh-oh. Somebody held up the stage again. And I was out to Rawson's and got red dust on myself." He looked around. "Where's Lacy Kane?"

"Comin' down the street right now," somebody yelled.

Sue wanted to close her eyes. She felt weak; her knees wanted to cave in. There was Lacy Kane all right. Fresh as a daisy. Her scheme had worked, all right—it had worked to put Dan right behind the bars

again. And this time the town would be dead against him.

She felt his gray eyes upon her. "Sue, is this the way you wanted it?"

She shook her head dumbly. Now she knew why he'd flunked out of law school. He was just a big, grinning, easy-going oaf. Then she sighed. But she'd go down to the jail tonight, she knew, and bail him out, even if it took every cent of the three thousand dollars she owned.

She did, and he walked her home, and when he left her at the little white front porch of her house, he patted her hand and said, "Thanks, Sue, you're sure a—a brick." Then he walked away.

Sue took a deep breath. What could a girl do?

IN THE dreary days that followed, pretty Sue Morley waited on hardware trade and took care of the post office as usual, but her vivacious smile was missing. Every evening she'd cancel the letters with a grim watchfulness; then, disappointed, lock the establishment and go home to a solitary evening as an old maid. Dan was out chasing around the country, trying to sell things. Undoubtedly it wouldn't have been any different if he were in town, she thought wearily, and it was hard to keep her eyes and ears closed to young Danny Thorpe of the Cross B and Sammy Smith of the Rafter M and others of her old gang whom she met on the street. But her man's image always swung before her eyes, and she knew she was hopelessly in love with Dan, although sometimes she wondered if it were only because of his troubles.

Then one evening two weeks after the second holdup, Sue saw a batch of letters on the canceling desk and she grew rigid with excitement. These were what she'd been waiting for. The messenger boy from the mine had just mailed them. She grabbed up a handful and ran out the door and down to Judge Henderson's office.

Sheriff Thomas was there also. Sue said, come with me, both of you. I want you to hear what I've got to say to Tom Kane."

Puzzled, the two old friends of her father's followed her up to the hotel, where, as luck would have it, Kane was just coming out. And Gladys Coffin, rouged and in a black taffeta party dress, was clinging to his arm.

At the sight of the younger and prettier girl, whom she knew Kane had once been crazy about, the beauty operator lifted her chin and clung tighter to Kane's big arm.

Sue ignored her. In her brown work skirt she planted herself on the lower step before Kane and pushed up her short sleeves. Her under lip was shoved out, and there was a fighting glint in her wide brown eyes. It reminded Judge Henderson and Sheriff Dewey Thomas of days gone by when fighting Bob Morley was among them.

"Hold on a minute there, fancy Lacy Kane," Sue cried. "I reckon you've come to the end of your tricky rope."

Kane stopped. He smiled and touched his blond moustache. "Now what, little spitfire?"

Gladys Coffin made a motion to go around Sue. "Come, Tom dear. We'll be late for the party."

Sue moved around to hold her ground. She wasn't conscious that others had gathered on the hotel porch and were listening, and that Dan had come up an alley tired and dusty from a long day in the saddle. He, too, stopped and listened behind Judge Henderson and the sheriff.

Sue thrust out the letters she'd been canceling. "Your penny-pinching habits have trapped you, Tom Kane! Oh, you were foxy enough about hiring Joe and Russ Rawson so Dan wouldn't have an alibi for that first holdup you tried to pin on him, and fate played us a dirty trick when the Judge's horse pitched him and Joe Rawson accidentally wasn't home that second time. But this—" she shook the letters in front of Kane's smiling face—"is evidence you can't

possibly deny. You mailed these letters!"

Kane glanced at them. "Sure. They're from my office. What of it?"

"Look close at them. Look at that stamp. It's what they call a commemorative stamp. This one has just come out. It's in honor of Abe Lincoln's one hundredth birthday anniversary. It looks so much like the regular kind one would hardly notice it, but I wrote to the Green Springs postmaster just before the last holdup and told him to send me some *with the next payroll shipment.* The bandit who took the payroll took those stamps too. You, Tom Kane. But you out-foxed yourself when you tried to make use of the stamps. And don't say you could have bought this kind at Green Springs because Mr. Beecher promised not to sell any until he'd heard from me. Now do you see, Mister Fancy Lacy Kane?"

Kane took the three steps in one stride. His handsome face was suddenly florid. "All that's a lie. It doesn't prove a thing. You're just a scheming little face-scratching—" He raised a big hand as if to push Sue in the face.

For an instant Sue thought he had struck her, for she was swept aside forcibly, but it was with a gentle force, and the next thing she heard was a flat, wet sound. She blinked her eyes. The *splat* was the impact of Dan Reevers' fist against Lacy Kane's well-upholstered right cheek.

"Don't you hit my girl!" And Dan Reevers left his feet in a roaring dive for the sprawled mine superintendent. Gladys Coffin screamed, but Sue just stood motionless, fascinated.

Lacy Kane was bigger and heavier, but Dan Reevers was large-boned and had the muscle to go with it. And, besides, there was a fire within him that knew no quenching. They rolled and struggled and slugged. They came off the steps and down onto the board walk, first one on top, then the other. Horses at the hitching rail snorted and reared. The fighters didn't notice. They hammered at each other in the dust and then were out in the street. Lacy Kane's fancy clothes were no longer spotless. As for Dan Reevers, his dusty tan shirt was ripped across his back, and his bared head with its ragged, uncut hair was sweaty, and bloody from a cut eye.

At the sight of the blood on Dan, Sue gave a small cry and started to run forward, but at that moment Dan swung to his feet. He had the groggy Kane by the coat front. He yanked Kane upward, and with one up-swinging blow sent the mine superintendent across the street, where Kane fell in a limp, motionless heap.

Sue saw Dan stagger after him. She saw that Kane was not out, but he would not get up. He was a whipped and beaten man. While her man—glorious, tattered, undefeated—

And she'd thought he was no fighter!

She ran forward. "Dan! Oh, Dan!" And then, wonder of wonders! His arms opened. She was swept into them. She felt those great, long arms of his closing about her, pressing her close, squeezing her. She heard his husky voice in her ear.

"Sue, when I saw him raise his hand to strike you, something busted loose inside me. Sue, I—I love you. I've been trying to hold back; I didn't think you wanted me, a big, clumsy—"

She raised her lips. She knew she was crying, for her heart was bubbling over with happiness. She heard Sheriff Thomas and Judge Henderson pulling Tom Kane to his feet and dragging him off to jail. Then Dan's lips were on hers, seeking and pressing, and she closed her eyes and blissfully let herself get lost in her fighting man's kiss. . . . ♥ ♥ ♥

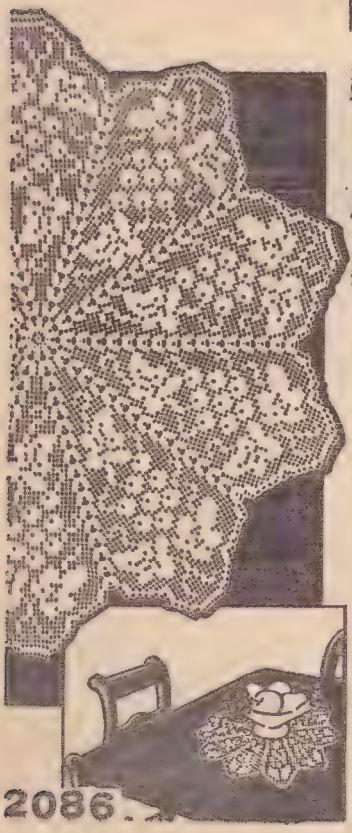
NEEDLE CIRCLE

The NEW Needlework News is here! Pages of delightful designs . . . plus a gift pattern printed in the book. Contains "How-To" directions on knitting and crocheting for beginners. Send 25 cents in coin.

2107. Enchanting Southern belle in embroidery and ready-made eyelet ruffles creates the most breath-taking bedlinens. Gay colors and simple stitchery will help speed your needle along. Hot iron transfer for 3 designs.

5974. Crochet these adorable slippers and toeless booties for baby's "high-kicks". Work them in cotton for countless tubbings and trim with ribbon.

2107



2086

2086. This 23-inch centerpiece makes a distinctive piece for any table top. Filet-crochet shows the classic grape cluster and leaf motif to great advantage.

5974

RANGELAND LOVE STORIES
P. O. Box 100, Station G
New York 19, N. Y.

Please send me the following patterns, for each of which I enclose 25c. (Print name and address clearly.)

Pattern Numbers .....
Name .....
Street Address .....
City .....
State .....

December, 1952

Pen Pards

Here's your introduction to a lot of swell pen pals.

WELCOME, one and all, to the Pen Pards corral! We have a grand bunch of letter-writers on hand, just waiting to step up and be introduced to you. There are lads and lassies from all over, with as many different interests and hobbies as you can imagine. But there's one thing, at least, that all of them have in common. What is it? Why, they'd all like to get a letter from you!

Don't let them down, friends. It's so easy to strike up a lasting pen friendship through this department—and so pleasant, too. You'll be missing a lot if you don't send off a letter to at least one of these pards—the more the merrier. Do it today, won't you? You'll find the address right with the letters.

Help Keith Win!

Dear Editor:

Since my arrival in Korea, the fellows in my platoon have been competing in a little contest of receiving letters. Here's hoping this letter gets a response that puts me in first place and gathers me a number of pen pals, especially girls from 19 to 23.

I'm a machine gunner with the 27th Wolfhound Regt. I'm 6 ft. tall, 23 years old, have blue eyes and brown wavy hair.

My hobbies are all sports, roller skating, flying, photography, square dancing and letter writing.

Here's hoping you'll write. Would be glad to exchange snaps.

PFC. KEITH L. KINZER
US 52144730
Co. I, 27th Inf. Regt.
APO 25
c/o PM, San Francisco, Calif.

Parlez-Vous Français?

Dear Editor:

Any chance of a Frenchman crashing in? I speak and write French fluently, and letters in French will be answered. I've written to about 25 pen pards, but no answer. I absolutely guarantee an answer to every letter I receive.

I am 28, 5 ft. 7 in., 135 lbs., have dark hair and brown eyes. Hockey, fishing, hunting, bowling, movies and reading I like.

Please, fellows and girls from 10 to 50, help a lonely Frenchman pass his leisure hours.

FRANK BERGER
1571 E. 204th St.
Cleveland, Ohio

Pert and Petite

Dear Editor:

Usually after three strikes you're out, but here I am again, looking for another chance!

I'm 17, 5 ft. 2 (in my stocking feet), weigh about 100 lbs. and have brown hair and blue eyes. I like most all sports, and some of my other interests are horseback riding, seeing movies, and listening to Western music. Naturally my hobby is writing to pen pals and I also collect stamps.

I'm interested in hearing from all who can write—age doesn't matter. I promise to answer all letters and will exchange snapshots with all willing to. So how about swinging a few lines my way? I'm just dying to hear from yo all!

BETTY BROTHERS
Route #2
Corunna, Mich.

A Blonde and a Redhead

Dear Editor:

We are two girls who would like to have some people, preferably servicemen between the ages of 17 and 22, write to us.

Alfreida, known as Fritz, is 16 and blonde with brown eyes. She is 5 ft. 5 in. tall.

Lois, who is also 16, has red hair and hazel eyes. She is 5 ft. tall.

We both live in small towns and go to school on school buses. We enjoy sports, dancing, skat-

ing and just about everything. Lois is interested in music. We will try to answer all letters.

ALFREIDA ALLEN
Box 8
Likely, Calif.
and
LOIS ANKLIN
Box 95
Canby, Calif.

Hospitalized Leatherneck

Dear Editor:

Where there's a will there's a way—to get in the Pen Pards column! So here goes again.

I am a Texan. I have wavy auburn hair, blue eyes, and 6 ft. 3 in. tall and weigh 220. I am in a hospital at present, so how about dropping me a few lines? Will answer all letters and exchange snapshots. I am a leatherneck Marine.

PFC. BOBBY E. McKINNEY
120182
Ward 29-A USNH
Camp Pendleton
Oceanside, Calif.

Joan Says "Show Me!"

Dear Editor:

I'm from Missouri, the Show-Me State, so how about showing me some spirited humans who can write?

"Five foot two, eyes of blue" describes me well, but there's more. I like most all kinds of sports and enjoy watching them. Also, I either have a good sense of humor or am mentally deficient, but I think it's just that I like having fun. So I'm waiting and hoping that I'll hear from you—yes, *you*—soon.

JOAN WILSON
605 Wilmington
St. Louis 11, Missouri

Tell It to This Marine!

Dear Editor:

This is my first try at getting in with the Pen Pards. I am 18 years old, 6 ft. 2 in. in height, weigh about 187 lbs., have brown hair, hazel eyes, and would be glad to send pictures of myself to anyone who would wish to exchange them.

My favorite sports are baseball and football. I like any kind of animals, especially horses and dogs, and I am a good listener to all music.

I am in the Marine Corps, and being away from home makes a person want to receive a letter from any boy or girl of any age who would write him.

PFC. DON WINKER 1196816
Service Co. H&S Bn. MCRD
San Diego, Calif.

South American Señorita

Dear Editor:

How are chances for a South American girl getting into your Pen Pards Club? I have been living in the United States almost four years now and just love it here, only there are times when I get very homesick.

I am 5 ft. 6¼ in. tall, weigh 135 lbs., have reddish-brown hair, hazel eyes and a fair complexion. I'm of Dutch and Scotch descent. I like all kinds of sports and am very fond of dancing. For hobbies I collect stamps, souvenirs and hankies.

Would like to hear from people all over the U.S.A., so won't you guys and gals give a South American gal a break?

DOROTHY MORRISON
1814 West Boulevard
Belleville, Ill.

Lulu Loves Letters!

Dear Editor:

Here's a letter-lover from Missouri who would like to get letters from servicemen here and abroad—mostly abroad, if possible.

My description? 5 ft. 4 in. tall, black hair and blue eyes, 17 years old and 120 lbs. I guess I'm like a stick of dynamite in some ways, but I'll be friendly to anyone who tries to be friendly to me, and I don't care anything about faith, beliefs, and such as that. I like sports of every kind, though most of all I like to watch boxing on TV at home. I like music—popular, classical, hillbilly, blues and most any other kind.

Come on and write. There's an answer and a picture to as many as write, if there aren't too terribly many. Let's get in the groove, boys!

LULU VINCENT
Kearney, Mo.

Musical Melodee

Dear Editor:

Maybe some of you readers can satisfy my curiosity. I am wondering if anyone in this wide world has the same first name as I, spelled the same way, or if you know of someone who has. If so, I would certainly appreciate your writing to me. Also, any person of any age, sex, race or occupation is welcome to write. You can be assured that you will receive a prompt reply.

I'd better describe myself a little. I am 18 years old, 5 ft. 2½ in. tall, 117 lbs., have red-gold hair and blue eyes. I am employed as a secretary for a lawyer. I love all sports, especially dancing. I have many hobbies—among them writing letters, collecting salt 'n pepper shakers and playing my accordian. I love music.

Please write soon.

MELODEE BALDWIN
Lacomb, Oregon

Flying High

Dear Editor:

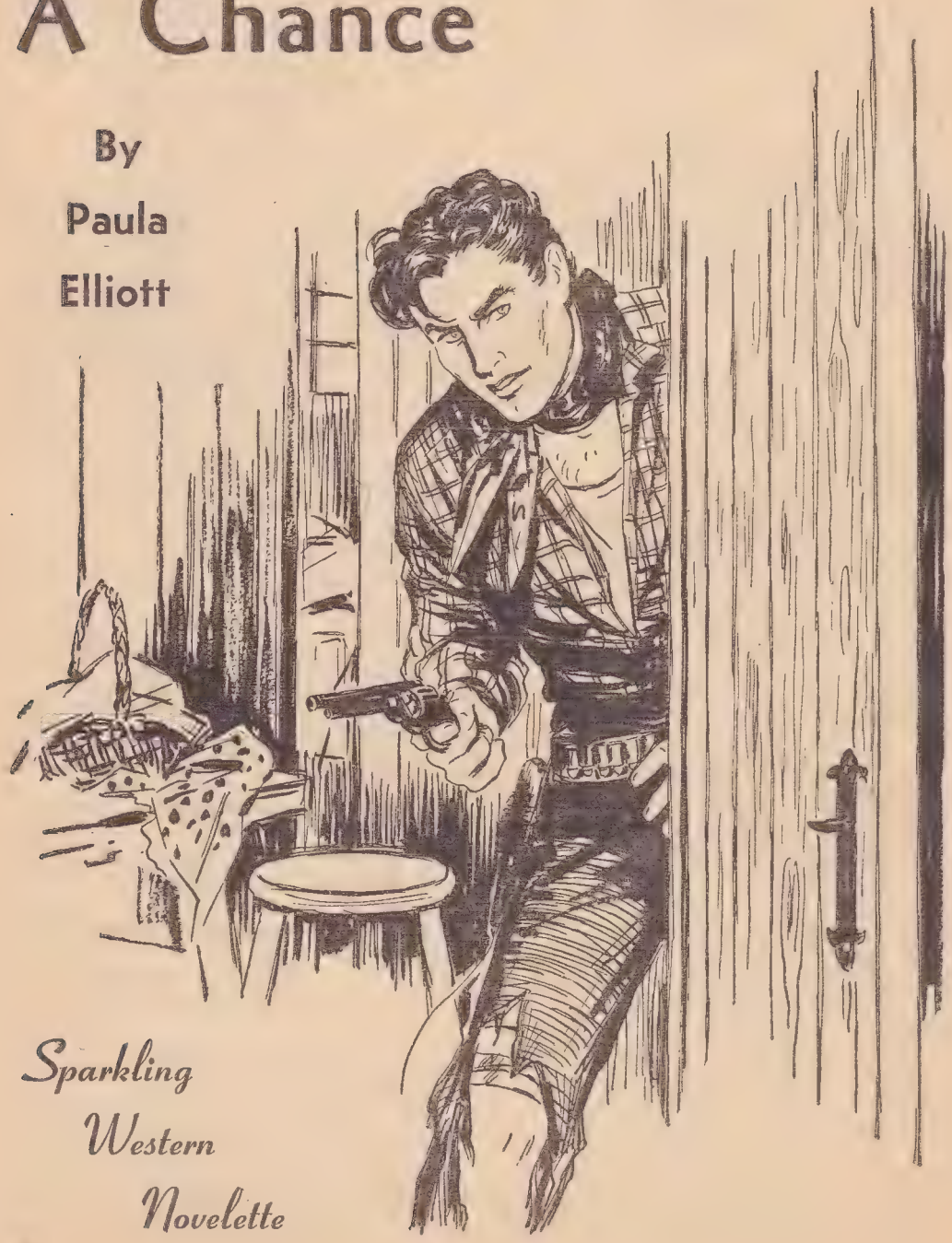
I wonder if there is anyone who would care to hear about life in Australia, New Guinea and the Philippines from an ex-Air Force veteran.

I am 30 years old, stand 5 ft. 10 in. tall, have black hair and blue eyes, and weigh 155 lbs. I promise to answer all letters and send pictures. My main hobbies are basketball, baseball, hunt-

(Continued on page 112)

A Spitfire Takes A Chance

By Paula Elliott



Sparkling Western Novelette

RR

There was no way to get over a man like finding another,

Tabby knew—and this handsome wanted man fitted her dreams to a T!

"Why, no, Sheriff," Tabby lied calmly. "I haven't seen a soul!"

TABBY PRESCOTT had had Jim Reade's ring on her finger barely an hour when they started to fight. Heaven knows, it wasn't Tabby's fault. She had done her utmost to try to make this evening the most romantic of her life. She had given the Wilsons, with whom

she was staying while her father was out of town on a business trip, ample warning that this was to be a special occasion. They had cooperated nicely, shooing the children upstairs and retiring themselves at half-past eight, so that Tabby and Jim could be alone on the vine-covered porch with only the big Arizona moon to see them. And what had Jim done with all this? He'd no sooner given her the ring than he'd started in taking about hardware stores!

It wasn't that Jim couldn't be romantic when he tried. In fact, he was just about the most romantic man Tabby had ever met. He was tall and lean, with a deep tan and sun-bleached brown hair, very blue eyes and a devil-may-care grin. And best of all, in Tabby's book, he was a bronc-buster—one of that envied fraternity who rode from ranch to ranch to gentle the orneriest broomtails on the range.

The first time she'd seen him, two months ago, Tabby had known he was the man for her. It was just a matter then of operatin' like the devil to make him notice her, and—which was much harder—getting him to pop the question before he took off over the hills in search of more broncs to bust and other girls to tame.

She'd been the most surprised girl in the world when he'd said the magic words last night. And yet, maybe she hadn't really been surprised at all, for in some strange way she'd had the feeling all along that Fate was taking a hand in pushing this thing through. It was as if she had been the heroine in a play, going through her lines in the blissful knowledge that every second was bringing her closer to the moment when Jim would ask her to be his bride.

And now he had, and he'd spoken to Pa too, and the most beautiful ring in the world was on her finger. And Tabby, who should have been happy enough to burst, was miserable enough to cry!

It was all her pa's fault, she thought bitterly. Her pa, whom she loved with all her heart, but whose weak points stuck out all over him like the speckles on a trout.

She hadn't been present for their man-to-man talk last night, of course, just before Pa had caught the late stage for Tucson, but from the results, she guessed it must have been a lalapalooza. Jim had come out looking white and shaken, a good ten years older. Tabby had been non-plussed. Pa had given them his blessing, hadn't he? What could be wrong?

Tonight, she'd found out. Jim had let it slip in a few studiedly off-hand words.

"Honey," he'd said, pulling her closer to him on the swing, "I've been thinking. Bronc-peelin's no job for a married man. A feller with responsibilities has to have something steady. Like—er, a job in a store."

"A store!" Tabby cried in dismay. "Oh, Jim, no!"

"Not just any old store, of course," Jim said hastily. "And I wouldn't be just a clerk, either. Your pa has offered me a chance to work for him, with the understandin' that someday soon—"

"Nuts!" she cut in inelegantly. "That's no place for you, Jim. You'd go crazy being cooped up with a lot of hardware. You're used to fresh air and freedom."

Jim shook his head. "Reckon I could change. Reckon I *gotta* change. I never thought about it before, but I sure don't have much to offer a wife. Just a tumbleweed sort of life, wandering from ranch to ranch to get work—with always the chance that someday an outlaw bronc is gonna tromp me and put an end to my workin' days."

TABBY stared at him, aghast. Could that be Jim talking? He'd never once given a thought to the danger of his job before; there wasn't a cautious bone in his body, much less a yellow one.

"Jim," she said anxiously, "you're not sick, are you? You're not coming down with something?"

"No, I feel fine. It's just that—well, I stayed awake all last night thinkin'. Do you realize, honey, that in all the time we been keepin' company, we never once talked about the future?"

"Sure we did," Tabby protested. "We talked about our ranch."

He shrugged impatiently. "That's not the future—that's a pipe dream. Hell, it'll be years before we save enough to even think about buyin' it."

Tabby looked at him for a long moment, searching his face. Then suddenly she burst out laughing. "Oh, I get it," she chuckled. "Pa! It's Pa who put this bee in your bonnet, isn't it, Jim?"

"Well, maybe so," he admitted. "But he's right, Tabby. A married man has got to settle down."

"Oh, phooey." Tabby dismissed the responsibilities of a married man with a wave of her hand. "Don't you listen to Pa, Jim. You know how *he* is. He's plumb loco on the subject of security."

It was true, too. Time was when Pa had been a lot like Jim—gay and confident and ready to take any dare life threw at him. But that had all changed when he'd lost Tabby's mother—lost her, he had convinced himself, because he'd had too big a dream about becoming the biggest cattle baron on the Aspen range. He'd over-extended himself, borrowing too much, and when several years of bad drought had come, he'd lost everything. Tabby's mother had worked too hard, and worried too much, trying to get them back on their feet again. Then she'd gotten sick, and there wasn't the kind of money to pay for the expensive doctoring that might have saved her. Pa had blamed himself for her death ever since.

That's why he'd jumped on Jim with both feet last night, when Jim had gone in to ask for Tabby's hand without a notion in his handsome head about how he intended to support her. . . .

Tabby could see it all clearly now. She felt vastly relieved. She could handle Pa, once he saw she really meant it. All she had to do was talk Jim out of this foolish hardware business and everything would be fine.

But it wasn't that easy. It wasn't that easy at all. Jim was a stubborn cuss when he got an idea in his head, and his sleepless night last night had stuck this idea there solid. Tabby could feel her temper slipping as she battered away at him to no avail, and she could feel his slipping too. Then suddenly they were both shouting at each other, and a full-fledged fight was on.

"Dad-blast it, honey," Jim yelled. "Can't you understand? You know a bronc-buster is an old man by the time he's thirty. You want me to keep at it till I'm shook so loose inside I can't even fork a horse?"

"Listen to Methuselah!" Tabby jeered, glaring at his 170 pounds of sinew and muscle. "For Pete's sake, Jim, you're only twenty-four. You've still got a *few* years of life ahead of you."

"Like Jake Underwood, huh? He was a bronc-peeler. Now he's pushin' a broom in a saloon while his wife takes in washin' and his kids run wild."

"All right!" Tabby shouted. "But you're not Jake. *You* don't have to ride the rough string till you fall apart. But, dawgone it, can't you find anything better to do than clerking in a hardware store?"

"Like what?" Jim demanded.

"Oh, anything with a little adventure in it. Like driving a stage, or signing on as a deputy or—"

"Huh!" he snorted. "Try and do it. There's a line of cowpokes a mile long waitin' for a chance at those jobs."

"Well, anything would be better than selling nuts and bolts. Even taking off for the goldfields and trying our luck."

"Oh, Tabby, talk sense. You know I can't do that."

"Why not? If I'm not scared to take a chance, why should you be?"

"Because I love you too much, that's why!" Jim was practically shouting down

the porch roof now. "Because I asked you to be my wife, and you're gonna have everything a wife ought to!"

Tabby flashed him a look of pure scorn. "Including the honor," she said witheringly, "of having folks point out my husband as the slick jasper who married Pa Prescott's store?"

Jim jumped back as if he'd been slapped. "Tabby, that's not fair! You know dang well I never gave the store a thought. Dammit, I never thought about anything except marryin' you!"

"Well, if you're so blamed set on throwing your life away on that mouldy old store, you can just *stop* thinking about marrying me. I'm not going to sit here and rot in Aspen all my life—not even for you, Jim Reade!"

Jim clamped his jaws shut on whatever he was going to retort, and a bleak silence fell over them. The only sound for ten minutes was the angry jingle of Jim's spurs as he paced up and down. As for Tabby, she sat stiffly on the edge of the porch swing, twisting the sparkling ring on her finger and wishing she were dead.

SOMETHING had gone terribly wrong. This should have been the happiest night in her life—the night she got engaged. Right now Jim should be holding her in his arms and thinking up new ways to tell her he loved her. He should be kissing her as only Jim could kiss. . . . She looked over at him and almost melted. Then she stiffened her spine. No, even if she never got another kiss all her life, she wasn't going to give in!

She was right; she knew she was right. There was a heck of a lot more to marriage than security. Why, if Jim would only say the word, she'd gladly run off with him and get married right this minute. So what if they were broke? She wasn't a china doll that had to be protected and coddled. She had pioneer blood in her veins, dawgone it! And that meant she'd side her man wherever he went—to cook for him and scrub for him and even starve with him if need be. But to settle down in this drab little cowtown—to start off their life together as humdrum storekeepers with nothing to look forward to but more petty chores and dreary responsibilities—this Tabby could not bear. This was the West, this was the frontier, and they were young! Did they have to forget all that just because they were getting married?

The mere thought of the adventure their life could be gave a lift to Tabby's heart. Jim felt the same way, deep down; she knew he did. Breathlessly, she turned to him. She's make him see it—she had to. . . .

But he was staring off into the night, his back to her. Every line of his body looked stubborn and unyielding; he was as unreachable as if he were a hundred miles away. Tabby felt her sudden hope choke off in unaccustomed shyness. She didn't know how to say it. She just didn't have the words to paint this thing that was so close to her heart.

Sighing, she leaned back in the swing. It was no use. He would just think that she was being silly and romantic and frivolous. . . .

Minutes dragged by in silence. Then suddenly the floor creaked and Jim stood before her, glaring.

His hands shot out and seized her shoulders and yanked her to her feet. She came up against him so hard that her head smacked his chin, but he didn't seem to notice. He held her off a little, shaking her, and scowling at her as if he'd like to choke her.

"Dammit, Tabby," he burst out. "You may be a romantic little fool, but you're not going to bust us up!"

Then his arms tightened roughly and his mouth came down hard.

This wasn't the way Tabby liked to be kissed. She liked to be approached gently, considerately, as if her consent were important. But this wild man that Jim had

become wasn't asking anything—he was simply taking. He crushed her first outraged resistance as if it didn't exist. He ignored her attempt to go cold and unresisting and wait it out. And suddenly, Tabby's defenses crumpled. It was no use. Her own blood betrayed her, storming through her veins, throbbing in her pulses, thundering in her heart until the last spark of feminine pride flickered out. She caught him to her, vanquished and not ashamed of it. Why should she fight him, when every bone in her body ached with love for him?

With the end of her resistance, his kiss became gentle, and presently he tenderly led her to the swing and sat down beside her. With her head cradled against his shoulder and his lips softly caressing her hair, they sat for a long time in silence.

At last Tabby pulled away and smiled at him tremulously. "Oh, Jim," she breathed. "Why do we fight?"

He grinned. "So we can make up like this. Let's fight every day when we're married."

"Mmmmm. And make up *twice* a day." She ran her finger the wrong way up his clean-shaven cheek and then down again. "You don't really mind, do you, dearest? Giving up the hardware job, I mean."

Jim leaped up as if a hornet had stung him. "Oh, no!" he choked. "No!"

"But I thought—" Tabby began.

"You thought I was giving in? Because I kissed you? *Good Lord,* Tabby!"

Words seemed to fail him; his shoulders shook with his visible effort to control his anger. At last he croaked, in a tone of utter dispair, "Didn't anything I said get through your thick skull, woman? Not even the least speck of sense?"

His tone goaded Tabby worse than any shouted denunciation could have done. "No, it didn't," she yelled, "if the hot air you've been spouting is what you call sense! And don't you call my skull thick, you block-headed mule! If fool notions were dollars, you'd be the richest man in town!"

"Which I'll sure never be if I listen to you. *Sign on as a deputy,*" he mimicked. *"Head for the goldfields!"*

Tabby's voice went up a few notches. "Now, don't you get patronizing! If there's one thing I can't stand it's a patronizing man!"

"And I can't stand a woman who tries to lead her man by the nose. Pretending you thought I was giving in! Of all the childish, underhanded schemes—"

That did it. That really finished it. "Childish?" Tabby screamed. "Underhanded? When I was trying to save you from the mistake of your life! Well, if that's all you appreciate my efforts, I'll take them somewhere else. You're not the only fish in the sea, Jim Reade!"

Sobbing, she tugged at the ring on her finger, trying to get it off. It came off suddenly, and with it came the scalding tears. "There!" she cried, thrusting it at him. "Take it! Take it and get out of my sight!"

When he only stared at her, she flung the ring away from her as hard as she could. It bounced crazily down the steps and rolled clear to the plank walk, where it lodged in a crack. Jim looked at it and then at her, and his face went pale with anger. Then, without another word or so much as a glance at the ring, he strode down the steps and off into the night. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

Substitute Sweetheart

TABBY woke the next morning confident that Jim would be back before noon. Her assurance began to ebb when the morning passed and he didn't appear, and it changed into something close to panic when night fell with still no sign of him. Three days later, she faced the fact that he wasn't coming back—ever.

She knew now that it had only been a desire to jolt him on her part—a furious outburst of temper that had subsided as quick-

ly as it had come. But Jim had made it final. He had taken words she didn't really mean and twisted them into the end of everything. She might as well face it; they were through.

And to top it off, a rumor trickled back from the Pothook Ranch, where Jim was currently busting wild 'uns, that he was paying considerable attention to Old Man Carson's redheaded daughter. Already—just three days after he'd split up with Tabby! It was enough to blister a girl's soul.

Not that it would do him any good if he did come back. Tabby would throw him out so fast he wouldn't know what hit him! For by now her anger had grown so great that she was one mass of seething rage and hate. If he ever tried to patch things up, she told herself; if he ever showed his face again . . . But he didn't. He didn't even set foot in town. And Tabby was left alone with her furious fantasies of revenge and, every now and then, a bittersweet memory that twisted her heart with unbearable pain.

One thing puzzled her. The ring. She'd crept down in the middle of the night and looked for it, but it was gone. She was sure Jim hadn't taken it; she'd seen him walk off and leave it. Could someone have stolen it? Somehow, she couldn't bear the thought of anyone else wearing that ring. Jim had given it to *her,* dammit!

But what did she care about Jim and his old ring?

Tabby spent the third day in the store, as usual. With Pa off on his annual trip to replenish the hardware stock, the responsibility for running the store fell to her. When she wasn't busy waiting on a customer, Tabby glared balefully around her. This store was the cause of all her trouble. . . .

At last noon came, and Tabby gratefully turned over the shop to the oldest Wilson boy, who helped out for a couple of hours every day. Through the warm early summer sunshine, she slowly rode the mile out to her father's house on the main trail to town. He hadn't wanted her staying there alone while he was away, as their place was quite isolated and this country was always full of gunmen and outlaws. Some even said the notorious Courtesy Kid's bunch was holed up nearby. Her pa, however, had asked her to go out every noon to water the house plants and see that everything was in order.

She shivered a little as she opened the door. Everything here reminded her of Jim, who had spent so many hours courting her in the little parlor. Pictures of him crowded into her mind. Jim busting a wild bronc, sticking on with easy grace. Jim running toward her with his awkward horseman's gait. The touch of his eyes on her face, when others were about and they had to wait before he could take her in his arms. . . .

With her eyes turned carefully away from the settee, she headed through the living room toward the kitchen, but in the doorway a whisper of sound made her turn back.

At first she thought her nerves were playing tricks on her. But no, he was real, all right. A man lying asleep on the settee, his face dark with several day's growth of beard and his clothes shabby and dusty.

Tabby gasped, and the man's eyes flew open. Instantly he was on his feet, his hand flashing for his gun in a blur of motion. The next thing Tabby saw was the yawning muzzle of a .45, aimed straight at her middle.

She stood frozen, while the moment stretched out thin and taut. Then, abruptly, the man lowered his gun and smiled.

The smile made all the difference in the world. It transformed, as if by magic, the rough-looking hardcase into an engaging boy. He was hardly more than twenty, Tabby saw now, and exceptionally attractive, with his dark eyes crinkling at the corners and his black hair falling carelessly over his forehead. Under the spell of his

disarming smile, her painfully slogging heart changed its beat to something curiously like anticipation.

He slipped his gun in his holster and studied her with a devilish glint in eyes. "Well, I shore didn't expect this!" he said. His voice was pleasantly husky. "But I'm sorry I boogered you, ma'am. I figure the house was empty."

"Who are you?" Tabby got out. "What are you doing here?"

"Takin' advantage of your hospitality, I reckon. You see—" His words broke off as a spasm of pain crossed his face, and for the first time Tabby noticed that a dirty bandana was tied around his left leg just above the knee. Her eyes flew to his face, and she saw that he was white beneath his tan.

"You're hurt!" she cried.

"Yes'm, a mite." He glanced down at his leg. "Reckon I got this thing to bleedin' again." Then he swayed so giddily on his feet that Tabby thought he was going to fall.

She leaped forward, without conscious thought, and caught him just in time to ease him down onto the settee. He sank back with a muffled groan.

"Don't mind me," he muttered. "I'll be able to push on in a minute."

"Nonsense," Tabby said. "First you're going to let me take care of that leg."

As she said it, she was fumbling with the makeshift bandage. When she pulled it off, she had to close her eyes a minute. A bullet had torn a nasty furrow through the flesh, and though it wasn't a serious wound, it wasn't pretty to see. Tabby gritted her teeth. She'd never done any nursing before; but this was as good a time as any, she reckoned, to start.

WITH hot water and fresh bandages, she set to work. It wasn't nearly so bad as she expected. Once she got started, she almost enjoyed it. A heady sense of drama bouyed her up; she felt sort of like Clara Barton in the Civil War. She wished Jim could see her now—Jim who thought she had to be treated like a hot-house rose. With a feeling of pride she'd never had before in her life, she fastened the bandage securely and made the stranger lie back while she bathed his face with a wet cloth.

He caught her hand and pressed it to his lips, looking at her so warmly that she had to blush. "Tell me," he said. "How'd you get to be so pretty and so smart both?"

"Hush," she said. "Don't talk till you're feeling stronger." She got up and fetched her father's bottle of snake-bite whiskey. "Here—take a drink. You got one of Pa's old union suits for a bandage; you might as well have his whiskey too."

The man held up the bottle before he drank. "To the most beautiful nurse west of the Mississippi," he said.

Tabby had to turn away. There was something very disturbing about the way this man looked at her. His dark eyes seemed to take in everything from her shining blonde hair to her booted feet, lingering over each curve as if to say he'd never seen a woman to match her. It filled her with confusion and a little thrill of fear, yet she wasn't offended. It was balm to her bruised pride that another man than Jim found her attractive—particularly such a good-looking hombre as this.

If his eyes were bold, his voice was as courteous as a girl could ask. "Reckon I should introduce myself," he said. "Name's Link Graham."

She hesitated only an instant. "Mine's Tabby Prescott."

"Mmmmm. Well, howdy, Tabby."

"Howdy, Link."

There was an awkward little pause. A name was all very well, but it didn't tell how the stranger had gotten wounded, or why he was camping in her house. Yet Tabby hesitated about asking. The answers could be embarrassing—even dangerous. For if there was one thing Tabby could guess about this man, it was that he

was the kind of gent who lived on danger.

As if sensing her thoughts, he smiled at her. "Reckon it's time I gave you an explanation."

"When you're feeling up to it," Tabby said. She was dying of curiosity, yet she rather dreaded hearing what he had to say. She'd suddenly realized that Link Graham had all the earmarks of a wanted man, a fugitive from the law. He might even be one of the Courtesy Kid's wild bunch. And once he'd confessed that he was, he would automatically become an enemy. . . .

"I know it looks bad," he said, as if reading her mind once again. "But I'm a pretty nice feller when you get to know me. Honest. I admit I shot a man back in Chickopee Pass—but it was in a fair fight. If he hadn't happened to be the brother of the sheriff there, that woulda been the end of it. But the sheriff threw me in jail without even lettin' me tell my story, and was fixin' to have me lynched when I busted out."

"The sheriff did that?" Tabby said. "Why, that's the dirtest trick I ever heard of! If it's true," she added cautiously.

"You think I'd lie to you, beautiful, after all you've done for me?" For a moment Link's big brown eyes looked at hurt as a whipped puppy's. Then he said bitterly, "You just can't imagine that a skunk exists like that dirty, lowdown—excuse me, honey—I mean like that lousy Sheriff Ogleby. He winged me when I busted out, but I got away and kept ridin' till I came to your house, here, sometime last night. There wasn't nobody around, and I was so tuckered out I didn't give a hoot if they hanged me as long as I got a good sleep first. I been sleepin' here on your settee ever since."

He could be lying, Tabby thought. His story had poured out easily, but a cornered outlaw is the glibbest liar on earth, Pa always said. And yet it was hard to believe he was a badman, a killer fleeing from a justly deserved handrope. He was so young, so clean-cut, so exceptionally polite. If he were really bad, wouldn't her woman's intuition tell her so?

Besides, Tabby thought recklessly, what did it really matter if he was an outlaw? He'd never harm her, she was sure. And with Jim gone out of her life, what was there to stop her from taking a chance?

"All right," she said. "I believe you."

He squeezed her hand, and she realized he'd been holding it all through his recital. "Thanks," he said huskily. "I'll remember this moment all my life. . . ." He gave her hand a final squeeze and sat up. "Now," he said briskly," I got to be ridin'."

"Riding?" she cried. "But where? How?"

"I got my cayuse hidden out in the brush in back of the barn," he said. He grinned at the alarm on her face and touched her cheek with one finger. "Don't look so downcast, beautiful. Maybe my leg won't let me get on a horse and ride away from you just yet. Reckon I gotta try, though."

"Don't be silly," she said. "You're as wobbly as a new calf."

"Yeah, but I'd shore hate to have old Ogleby catch up with me here in your house. On the other hand, though . . ." He paused thoughtfully.

"On the other hand, what?"

"It just hit me what a perfect hideout this house would—" He broke off, shaking his head. "No, I couldn't ask it. You've done enough for me already."

"But if you aren't strong enough to ride yet," Tabby faltered. She hesitated. Pa would skin her alive for even thinking of offering shelter to a wanted man, crooked sheriff or no. But the alternative was a hard one. Either she let him stay, or Link Graham with his boyish grin and his charming manner would ride out of her life forever. . . .

LINK shook his head firmly. "No, Tabby—don't say it. You're too nice a girl to risk trouble for the likes of me. I'll just

push along now." He started for the door, limping painfully, then stopped and turned. "Just one thing, honey, before I ride. Please—let me kiss you just once."

For a brief instant Tabby thought of Jim. Then she lifted her chin. "Why not?"

His hands closed on her arms and his lips brushed hers, as lightly as thistledown. But if he'd really meant that as his one kiss, it didn't work. They were too close to each other, and it went to their heads like a shot of moonshine. Tabby's eyes went wide; her breath caught in her throat. Then Link crushed her to him and buried his face in her hair.

"Tabby, Tabby!" he groaned. "Why did I have to meet you now?"

I'm lost if he kisses me again, Tabby thought wildly. *I won't let him, I mustn't!* But his mouth had already captured her own, bruising it with sweet fire, spreading a quicksilver warmth through her veins. The next thing she knew she was straining up to him, digging her fingers into his hard-muscled arms. This was wild and crazy and wrong—but oh, she thought, don't let it end just yet!

It was the drumming beat of horses' hoofs that broke them apart. Horses' hoofs coming this way and coming fast. Still in each other's arms, they listened uncomprehendingly.

Then Link stepped back. "The posse!" he said. "They're almost here!"

Tabby's eyes flew to the window. Already the first horseman was rounding the bend from the north, with two riders hard on his heels. "What will we do?" she breathed.

"I'll have to hide—in another room. Try to stall them if they come in." He gave her hand a quick squeeze. "Remember, I'll be countin' on you."

The three riders came up to the house and stopped in a cloud of dust. Tabby took one panicky look around the room and hastily shoved the basin and Link's hat out of sight under the settee. Then, trying to stop her trembling, she hurried to answer the loud knock on the door.

Unaccountably, the sight of the man on the porch steadied her. Again the sense of drama came to her rescue. She studied her adversary coolly. He was a lean, sour-faced whiplash of a man with a badge on his chest, and amazingly like the mental picture she'd had of Sheriff Ogleby from Chickapee Pass.

She ignored the other men still sitting their horses. "Well?" she said coldly.

The sheriff held his hat in his hands. "Howdy, ma'am. Don't want to alarm you, but we're trailin' a killer from up north a piece. Your house is right on the main trail. You happen to see a feller on a black horse come by?"

"Killer?" said Tabby. "On a black horse? Why, no, Sheriff, I haven't seen a soul."

"Well, ma'am, we lost him quite a piece back, but we're pretty sure he come this way—last night some time, we figure. He's likely headin' for the border."

"Well, I certainly hope you find him. A killer, you say?" Tabby shivered realistically.

She watched them ride off, smiling to herself. That hadn't been half bad, the way she'd gotten rid of them. You might think she'd been outwitting crooked lawdogs all her life. Breathlessly, she called for Link to come out.

Link gave her a big hug. "M'gosh, woman, you're something! I better take you along with me for my guardian angel."

He was joking, of course, but his words gave Tabby a curious thrill. What would it be like, she wondered, to take the fugitive trail with this man? She shook off the thought, but she couldn't shake off the feeling of excitement inside her. She felt more like the heroine of a play than ever, although she hadn't the foggiest notion what would happen next.

"I'm gonna ride in a minute," Link said. "But I can't go without one more kiss."

He pulled her over to the settee and down onto his lap. Maybe it was because Jim had held her that way in the same spot so many times in the past, but Tabby suddenly found herself returning Link's kiss with abandon. It sure was true, she thought dizzily, that there's no way of getting over a man like finding yourself another. Sighing, she snuggled closer. . . .

The whirring sound of the old grandfather clock brought Tabby back to reality. It was striking two o'clock. She jumped up in alarm.

"My stars!" she cried. "The store! I got to get back or my substitute will be sending the posse after *me.*"

She dashed for the door, paused, and slowly turned back. Link was standing by the settee, looking angry. Then the hurt puppy look came back into his brown eyes.

"I reckon this is good-by, then," he said huskily. "I won't be here when you get back."

"But of course you will! You—you said yourself that you probably still can't ride. You just make yourself at home—there's some canned food in the kitchen—and I—I'll be back this evening."

Hugging the glowing look he gave her to her heart, Tabby fled out the door. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

Rendezvous With Danger

TABBY found her self pinching her arm every half hour or so during the rest of the long afternoon. Some of the pinches were to convince herself that she hadn't merely dreamed up Link to fill the aching void Jim had left, and some of them were to prove that she still was Tabby Prescott—not some harum-scarum hussy who'd spent the noon hour kissing a stranger and hiding him from the law!

For now that she was away from Link's magnetic presence, she was rather aghast at herself. She knew so little about him. He'd told her nothing of where he came from or what he did, not even why he'd gotten into the gunfight with the sheriff's brother. It seemed to her, looking back on it now, that every time she'd started to get curious, he'd knocked her questions right out of her head with an admiring look or a kiss. Only two things she knew about him for sure: young as he was, that boy had known plenty of women on his back-trail; and what was worse, he was just about the most dangerous man she had ever met!

Not that that was going to stop her from going back to him this evening, no sir! She'd been hankering for adventure for a long time, and sister, this was adventure!

She fell to picturing Link again: his wistful brown eyes, his nice smile, his wonderful gallant way of making her feel like the most desirable woman on earth. A girl could tell a gentleman, all right, no matter what his clothes were like. Then a thought struck her like a bolt of lightning. What if—*what if* he asked her to ride with him tonight?

But of course he wouldn't. And of course she'd never go.

Nevertheless, a throbbing started in her pulses that threatened to burst them wide open. This kind of thing, she thought dreamily, happened to a girl only once in a lifetime. . . .

About five o'clock, she had a shock. Looking out the window, she saw Jim Reade striding up the street. For one wild moment her heart seemed to explode; she thought elatedly, *He's coming at last!* But he walked on by without glancing at the store, and Tabby clutched her throat until her heart went back down where it belonged. The old goat, she thought. He was the last person on earth she wanted to see.

It was nearly seven-thirty before Tabby got away from the solicitous Wilsons and arrived, by circuitous route, at her house. She and Link had agreed on a knock for her to use. Feeling delightfully like a conspirator, she gave the signal. He opened the door and pulled her into his arms.

He had shaved and washed and changed clothes, and he looked more dashing than ever. Tabby wondered, though, if her pa would appreciate Link's borrowing his shirt and new levis without asking permission. Then her thought was drowned out by Link's persuasive kiss.

She pulled away finally, feeling flustered and dizzy and rushed off her feet. "No," she stammered, holding him off. "Enough's enough. Besides, I've brought you some supper."

He grinned. "You're all I want to eat, honey."

She slid out of his reaching hands. "You're going to eat some of Mrs. Wilson's stew and like it," she said. "Come out and help me."

He followed her to the kitchen, but his help consisted mostly of putting his arm around her and nibbling on her ear. Finally Tabby shoved him in a corner.

"Now, you behave," she said, "or I—"

"What was that?" he cut in tensely. "I heard a noise."

They strained their ears to listen. Faintly, from the direction of town, came the beat of hoofs. In a few minutes they were very distinct.

"Oh-oh," Link said. "Here we go again." He kissed her cheek lightly as he hurried into the bedroom. "Give 'em your stuff, angel."

Tabby waited calmly. If this were the posse again, she'd get rid of it in short order. But she felt a little nervous when she saw the riders pause some distance from the house, then slowly fan out to encircle it. It was hard to see in the growing dusk, but there must be six or seven men this time. She saw them draw their guns, and then a voice called:

"Tabby, is that you in there?"

Her heart did a sickening skid. Jim's voice! What was *he* doing here?

Her eyes picked out Sheriff Ogleby and several men from town, including the As-

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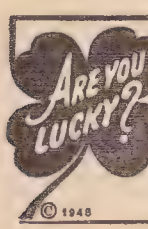

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pen sheriff. Good grief, that mangy Ogleby had tricked half the town into joining his posse! But Jim was calling again; she had to answer.

"Sure it's me," she called back. "Who'd you think it was, Sitting Bull?"

"Come on out on the porch so we can see you."

"Dawgone it, what's this all about?" But she stepped out onto the porch, not daring to disobey.

Jim flung himself off his horse. "Thank heaven you're all right!" he muttered, and if Tabby hadn't been so preoccupied, it would have done her soul good to see the concern on his face. He seemed about to take her in his arms, but thought better of it. Instead he said formally:

"This is a posse huntin' a killer who just escaped from the pen and killed the jailer doin' it. We got to search your house. A kid down the road said he saw somebody skulking around here late this afternoon."

"Really?" Tabby said. "He must have been seeing things. I've been here quite a spell and there's not a sign of anybody."

"He'll be layin' low while you're in the house. Don't worry, Tabby, we'll rout 'im out."

"But—" Tabby cried. She bit her lip. "But I'm sure he isn't here," she said lamely.

Jim gave her a searching look. "Best make sure."

THERE was no stopping them. Protesting would only arouse more suspicion. But Tabby was in agony as three of the men, including Sheriff Ogleby and Jim, tramped through the house, prodding everything in sight with their guns.

They came to the bedroom where Link was hiding. Tabby shut her eyes, praying for a miracle. If they found him . . .

Then she opened her eyes and her heart started beating again. The men were

(Continued on page 102)

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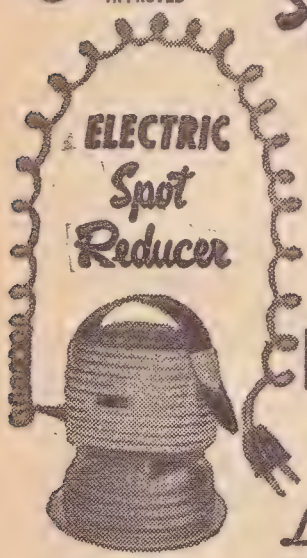

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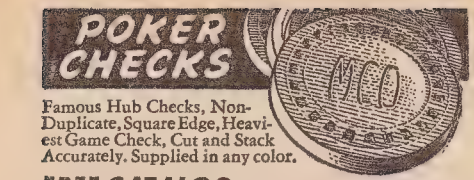

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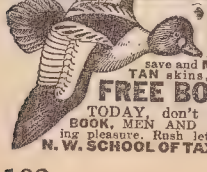

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(Continued from page 100)

tramping out, and Link wasn't with them!

After a hurried conference, the posse went outside, and the sound of their departing horses drifted in immediately afterward. Tabby stood in a daze, her mind still numb from the ordeal of the last few minutes. How on earth had Link escaped them? Had he managed to slip out a window unseen? Then she realized that Jim hadn't gone with the others.

He stood in the doorway, frowning at her. "You better let me side you back to town. I can catch up to the posse later."

"I don't mind riding alone."

"I mind, though."

"And what business is it of yours?"

He flushed. "None, maybe, except I wouldn't leave *any* woman here alone with that lobo killer around."

"Well, you needn't bother!" Tabby said acidly, putting it on as thick as she dared. "I told you I never wanted to see you again and I meant it! I'd rather take my chances with the orneriest killer alive than spend five minutes with you!"

His face tightened angrily, but Tabby knew it still wasn't enough. Stepping up to him, she slapped his face as hard as she could. Then she put her hand against his chest and shoved. He stumbled backward out the door, cursing. A paper in his hip pocket caught on the door jamb and fell to the floor. Before he could pick it up, Tabby slammed the door in his face.

"And don't you dare come back!" she shouted after him.

Her false anger dissolved in a flood of relief as she heard him mount and ride off. Poor Jim, she thought; she really felt a little guilty about treating him that way. She bent down and picked up the folded paper he'd lost, wondering if she'd ever see him again to return it. . . . Then her thoughts flew to Link. Was he still here?

"Link!" she cried. "Oh, Link!"

(Continued on page 104)

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RANGELAND LOVE STORIES

(Continued from page 102)

She ran to the bedroom door in time to see him emerging from the closet, dragging half a dozen dresses with him.

"Whew!" he said. "Sure was hot in there. I like to have smothered."

"But how?" Tabby said. "Didn't they look in the closet?"

"Sure, but I was chinnin' myself on the bar behind your entire spring wardrobe. One feller poked around a little, but he didn't poke hard." He nodded toward the parlor. "That gent that hung around your boyfriend?"

"Was," Tabby said shortly.

A familiar light came into Link Graham's eyes at her answer, and Tabby turned away fast. She knew what was coming. More of his potent kisses. And then—then he would talk about riding, and Tabby knew, as sure as she was standing there, that he was going to ask her to ride with him. What on earth was she going to say?

"I'm going to finish fixing your supper," she said hastily, "and you can stay here and put my clothes back on the hangers."

Safe in the kitchen, at least temporarily, she started to slice some bread and discovered that Jim's paper was still clutched in her hand. Absently she opened it, her mind still on Link. She had to make up her mind—now, before he started kissing her again.

Automatically, she looked at the paper in her hand. It was a wanted dodger—with Link's picture on it! Then she laughed. Why, that dirty sheriff had even gone to the trouble of faking a reward poster! She started to read it, curious to see what barefaced lies he had to tell about Link.

$1000 Reward
Wanted—Dead or Alive!
Link Hollister alias Bert Graham alias
THE COURTESY KID

The Courtesy Kid! Her eyes froze on the words. If this dodger were a fake, it

certainly was a pretty darn brazen one!

FOR a moment, Tabby stood rooted to the floor, her blood running cold. Scraps of remembered talk were echoing in her brain. *Two more notches for the Kid now. Held up a stage and killed both guards . . . Robbed the Mesa bank again . . . Held up a train . . . A real mad-dog killer, that Kid.* . . . Louder and louder the voices grew, dinning in their tale of thievery and murder. But what chilled Tabby to the marrow of her bones was something her pa had said:

Woman never lived that lady-killer could not charm. Know how he got outta the Crockertown jail? Talked the damn jailer's wife into givin' him the key!

But no, it wasn't true! Link wasn't the Kid—he couldn't be! This was just some of the sheriff's dirty shenanigans to make dead sure Link got caught. Besides, she remembered with a rush of relief, the Courtesy Kid was in jail again! He'd been convicted of murder just last month and was sweating in the death cell now.

Or was he? Jim had said the killer had busted out of the pen—and killed a guard doing it!

Trembling, Tabby turned back to read the rest of the poster. She'd just had time to see that Link's description fit when his voice drifted in from the parlor.

"Hey, beautiful, how's supper comin'?"

Tabby jumped a foot. She jammed the dodger in her pocket just a second before he appeared in the doorway.

He looked at her, frowning. "What's the matter? You see a ghost?"

"J-just a mouse," Tabby stammered.

He grinned. "What, no scream?" But his light tone did not match his eyes; they were fastened on her intently, very hard and very cold. Or was that just her imagination? The next moment he was smiling easily. "Better make that a box lunch, angel. I got a feelin' we'd better be hittin' the trail *muy pronto.*"

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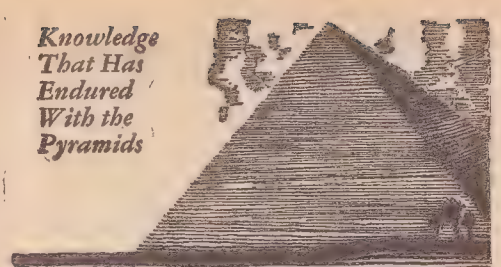

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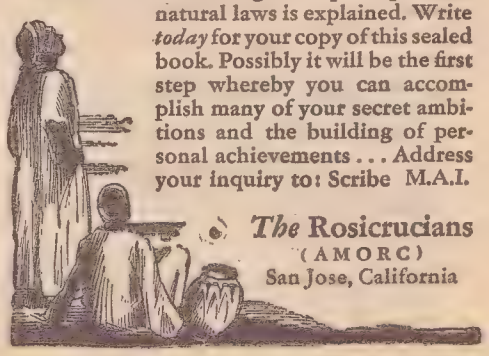

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"We?" Tabby said. "You mean—?"

"Of course. You think I'd dream of leavin' you behind?"

Ten minutes ago, Tabby would have given her right arm to hear those words. Now they filled her with terror. She still didn't know for sure that Link was the Courtesy Kid, but if there was one chance in a hundred . . .

He reached out his arms for her, and with a supreme effort of will, Tabby made herself step into them. He must not guess that she suspected him. There had been ugly talk, too, that the Kid had once murdered a woman who got in his way. . . . Her only hope was to stall for time—to accept his caresses and hope he couldn't sense her sudden shuddering revulsion. . . .

She put everything she had into that kiss. One thing, at least, her brief acquaintance with Link had taught her—how to dissemble. She dissembled with a vengeance now. She clung to him ardently, her fingers digging into his shoulders and her lips pressing up to his, while her blood slowly curdled in her veins. Dear Lord, she thought, were these the lips that had deceived a hundred women from here to Canada?

She was almost too weak to stand when at last he let her go. Her knees got even weaker when she heard his next words.

"You see, angel?" he said softly. "I *can't* leave you behind now. It'd be like signin' my own death certificate."

Tabby took one look at his eyes and knew he wasn't worrying about dying of a broken heart. She forced her stiff lips into a rapturous smile.

"Oh, Link, you sweep a girl plumb off her feet! I want to come with you so much, darling—I never wanted anything so much in my life! Only . . ."

"Only?"

"Well, you *are* running from the law. Maybe if we waited till your name is cleared . . ."

"That may take years!" he cut in. "Darlin', I can't wait that long. When a man finds a woman like you—when two people find a *love* like ours—nothing on earth should be allowed to come between them. Not even death! Why, I'd gladly face a firing-squad right this minute if I knew it meant we could be together in the life beyond!" He paused, looked at her searchingly. "But maybe you don't feel the same way. . . ." he added huskily.

"What do you mean?"

"Why, nothing. Just that—well, I *know* I could make it to the Border if you were with me."

Because you know no posse would dare shoot for fear of hitting me! Tabby thought.

Link went on talking, painting a glowing picture of their life together in Mexico, but she didn't hear him. Could she really have dreamed of saying these things herself, only a few short hours ago? Planned how she would convince him it was her right to share his hardships and dangers? Only she wasn't saying them now; he was. And she realized, suddenly, that it had been Link's idea that he stay on in her house—while he made her think it was hers! Oh, he was smooth, all right. Smooth as the devil himself!

And then Link ended his sales talk with the *piece de resistance*. Gently, tenderly, he slipped something on her finger.

"It was my mother's," he said in a choked voice. "You will wear it, won't you, darlin'?"

Tabby looked down at her hand. It was a diamond ring. *Jim's* diamond ring! When Link had sneaked through town last night, he must have found it lying on the walk. . . .

A white flash of fury ripped through Tabby's brain. Almost of its own volition, her hand came up and delivered a stinging slap square across Link Graham's face.

"You thief!" she cried. "You dirty, lying thief!"

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His eyes went wild. They went crazy—kill-crazy. His hands shot out and seized her throat; his fingers bit into the flesh and his lips twisted in a grimace that was a ghastly parody of a smile. And still those glittering, narrow eyes kept staring. He said, biting off each word, "Nobody—slaps—the—Courtesy—Kid!"

The steel-fingered grip tightened. Tabby fought and kicked and scratched, but still the choking fingers clung. She was getting dizzy; she could not breathe. . . .

"Let her go, Kid!"

She was dreaming. That was Jim's voice, but she was only dreaming—conjuring him up to rescue her the way it happened in story books. . . . Then the choking hold on her throat loosened, and she knew it wasn't a dream. Jim was really here, somewhere behind her!

She sagged weakly but did not fall. Swift as a lightning flash, Link caught her and spun her around. He got one of her arms behind her, forcing it up till sharp pain shot through her, cutting even the tearing agony in her lungs. Then his gun was spitting fire.

IT ALL happened in one instant of spouting gunflame and crashing thunder. Link fired once, twice, three times, and twice Tabby saw Jim's body jerk. But still he came on, staggering, holding his useless gun in both hands. He did not shoot; he couldn't shoot. He could not get Link without killing Tabby.

It was only a few short seconds, but it was an eternity of hell to Tabby. Jim's face seemed suspended before her eyes—white, pain-racked, desperate. He would get nothing but death if he kept on coming, but still he did not falter. . . .

Tabby heard Link curse, and she remembered, suddenly, his wounded knee. With an effort that nearly wrenched her arm out of its socket, she twisted and kicked back. She felt him wince and fall

back, and for a second his hold loosened. She wrenched free, blinding pain washing over as she fell forward. Then the floor rose up and smacked her face, and with the crash of guns around her, she fainted. . . .

She couldn't understand where she was. She lifted her head, with vast effort, and looked around. A yard away was a man's booted foot, toe pointed upward. She raised herself up, staring dully. Link Graham. He was dead. . . .

Jim! The thought ran through her like a knife. She whirled around. He was lying across the room, half propped against the wall, his eyes closed. She crawled over to him, her heart in her throat. Then her frantic hand touched his lips and felt the warm breath. He was still alive!

For a moment she could do nothing but cradle his head in her lap, while tears streamed down her face. Then she roused and opened his shirt. Two wounds, one in the shoulder and one, much more dangerous, lower down in the side of his chest.

She did not feel like Clara Barton or Florence Nightingale. She didn't feel anything but the terrible, harrowing necessity for stopping the bright flow of blood. This was Jim, her Jim. . . . And she didn't even realize that her arm was badly wrenched until she tried, a few minutes later, to pull herself up on her horse. She couldn't make it, so she turned and started walking, stumbling and haltingly, the mile to town.

She did not feel heroic even then. She felt dizzy and sick, and consumed with a terrible urgency to hurry, hurry. When she met the posse about halfway in to town, she was too far gone to speak. She merely pointed weakly in the direction of the house and collapsed in Sheriff Ogleby's arms. . . .

They took a lead-mine out of Jim Reade, but he was a tough young bronc-buster, and it didn't faze him for long. The very next afternoon after the grand finale, they let Tabby in to see him.

She came in with her arm in a sling and

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looked at his pale, grinning face propped up on the pillow, and the things she'd been rehearsing to say went flying out the window. She fell down on her knees beside him.

"Oh, Jim! "she sobbed. "I don't want to hear the word adventure ever again. I just want to live in a little house next to the h-hardware store and s-start making it up to you!"

He put a big knuckle under her chin and made her lift her teary face. "Kiss and make up—that's what we promised," he said softly. "And since we've lost a couple of days . . ."

"Oh, Jim, there's so much I have to explain!"

"No—now, honey. We got a lifetime for explanations." He chuckled. "Sometime we'll tell our grandchildren how I caught their grandma hiding an outlaw in her closet and—"

"Jim!" she cried. "You *knew* he was there?"

"And how," he went on, "I covered up for her because I didn't want her to get in dutch with the posse. I was too crazy about her, even if she was awful blame-fool romantic. And I'll tell them," he added, "how she slapped the outlaw's face when he tried givin' her my engagement ring."

"And I," Tabby said tremulously, "will tell them how their grandpa—though he was already wounded twice—walked up to the most dangerous outlaw in the West and shot that gunslick right through his ugly head! Oh, Jim, you were magnificent! You were so brave, so—"

"And right now I'm so impatient," he interrupted. "Will you please shut up and give me a kiss?"

Tabby shut up. Sometime between the third and the fourth kiss, she suddenly realized that the thousand-dollar reward was going to make a mighty fine down-payment on a ranch. But she didn't tell Jim, right then. What was a ranch compared to kiss number five? ♥ ♥ ♥

(Continued from page 56)

jealousy seemed to return. "You pulled her out first," she accused Hal petulently. "If you think so much of her, why are you marrying me?"

"I was wondering that myself," Hal said. "Laurie, you're a spoiled brat. Your stubbornness almost cost Marcia's life, as well as your own."

"Store man's girl better leave Washita," Big Horse told Hal. "Turtle Face hate. Might kill."

"Thanks, friend Big Horse." Hal shook hands with the Indian. "I'll take Laurie to Rocky Bluff. I think her father will arrange for her to stay in town now."

Big Horse started back toward the boat.

"Hey, Chief," Hal called, a devil-may-care smile flashing across his attractive face. "Will you take a message to Milner, heap big boss at the stage stand?"

The Indian grunted assent.

"Tell him I also take Marcia to Rocky Bluff. We marry. Marcia my squaw."

He pointed to himself, then unmistakably to Marcia. "The bravest, sweetest little squaw in all the world. The rampagin' old Washita taught me that."

But the last two remarks, Marcia was sure, were intended for other ears than those of the Indian. . . . ♥ ♥ ♥

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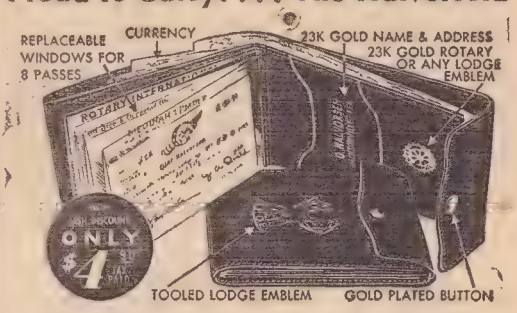

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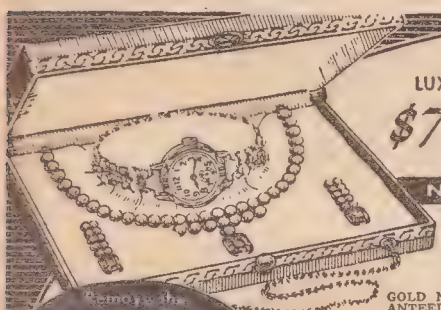

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(Continued from page 87)

ing, fishing and photography. Have quite a photo setup. I am employed with an airline in operations.

So come on, all. Write and you won't regret it.

RUSSELL WALSER
108 N. "C" St.
Arkansas City, Kansas

Texas Sunshine

Dear Editor:

I am a Texan, nineteen years of age, 5 ft. tall and full of pep. I have brown curly hair and blue eyes.

My home town is very small and there isn't much to do and at times it gets lonely. I am nicknamed (Sunshine) for my friendly smile. So boys and girls of any age, sling some ink my way and I promise to answer and exchange snapshots.

HELEN (SUNSHINE) BAILEY
Gen. Delivery
Childress, Texas

Way Up North

Dear Editor:

I saw your Pen Pards column and like it very much. Though this is the first time I have tried corresponding via Pen Pards, I believe it's quite a bit of fun and enjoy writing and hearing from different people.

At present I am in the Air Force and stationed here at Nome for six more months. I am sure people will enjoy hearing about the Land of the Midnight Sun and will do my best to tell them all about it. I am 23, 6 ft. 1 and weigh 170. I have brown hair and hazel eyes. Hope this makes lots of contacts.

SGT. MEL R. FINK
AF28773127
P.O. Box 191
Nome, Alaska

Here's Jimmy

Dear Editor:

I want to have some pen pals, so won't you please print my letter?

I'm 16 years old, have black hair and brown eyes, am 5 ft. 11 and weigh about 150. My hobbies are swimming, skating, dancing, football, baseball and basketball, and also I like writing letters.

So here's hoping I hear from many pals, both men and women, from 6 to 65.

JIMMY CRANFILL
605 Mt. Vernon Ave.
City View
Winston-Salem, N. C.

From Far-Off India

Dear Editor:

I wonder if there is room for one more in Pen Pards. I love to receive mail and photos

and to exchange gifts with the people to whom I write.

To begin, I must introduce myself. I am 5 ft. 2 in. tall. I have long black hair, blue eyes and a fair complexion. I am 16 years old, and I would like to hear from pen pals in Hollywood, Switzerland, Florida and Ireland. I would very much like to have a cowgirl pen pal.

Tennis and net ball are my favorite sports, and I also like dancing and reading books. I will try to answer all letters, but I would prefer to have girl friends from the age of 15 to 20. I hope my mailbox will be filling up pretty soon.

MISS PARI LALCHAND
Lal Baugh
No. 2 Centoph Road
Madras 18, South India

That uses up all the space in the corral for this time, pards. There'll be more room next time, though, so keep your pleas coming to us. Just address them to Pen Pards, c/o RANGELAND LOVE STORIES, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, New York.

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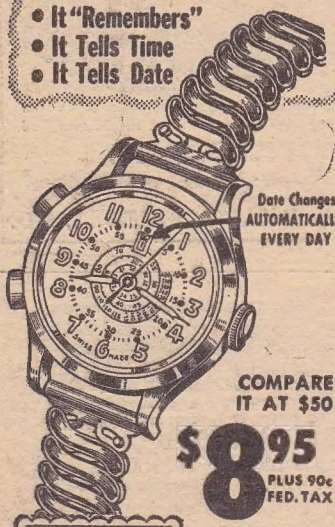

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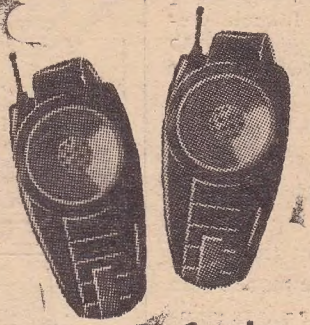

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